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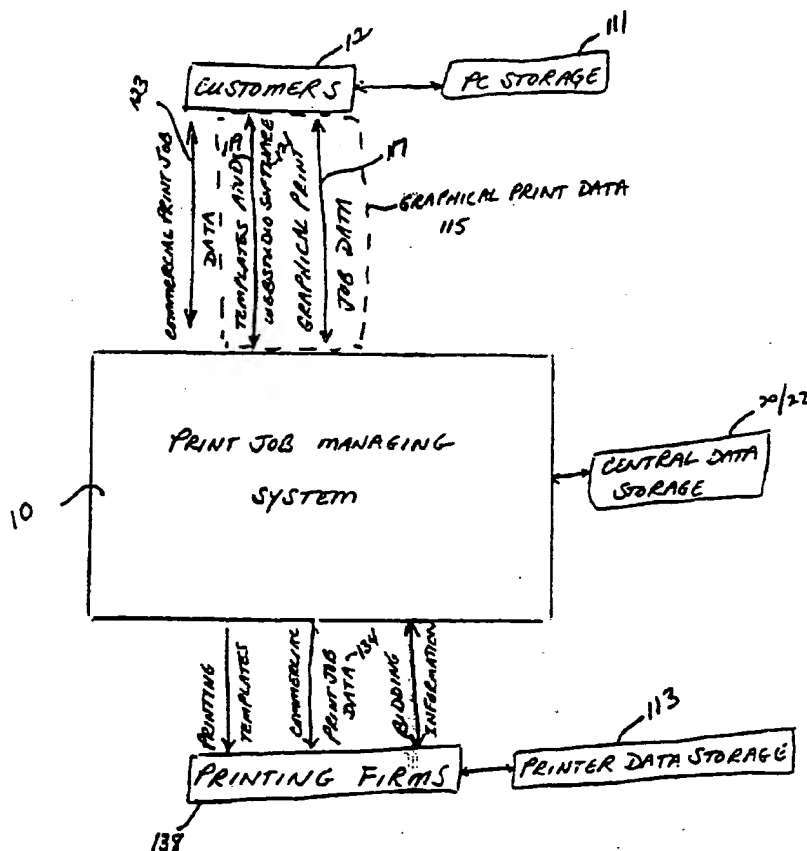
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(54) Title: **MANAGING PRINT JOBS**



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(57) Abstract: The invention provides methods for managing print job (10) such method includes (a) accumulating discrete print jobs electronically from respective customers (12), (b) aggregating the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate print jobs being printable at one time into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate print jobs being printable at one time on units of an integral print medium, and (c) electronically distributing the aggregate print jobs to respective printers for printing.



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Managing Print Jobs

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates to managing print jobs.

BACKGROUND

5 Short-run print jobs, e.g., business cards, letterheads, sell sheets, invitations, announcements, folders, brochures, and marketing materials, are generally printed by commercial printers using relatively small, low cost printing equipment. Because of the set-up time involved in changing from one print job to the next, and the relatively low volumes printed (often less than 1000 units/order), the printing cost is typically
10 relatively high, e.g., \$20-50 per thousand square inches ("MSI"). In some cases, several print jobs are manually "ganged" together (consolidated or aggregated) onto a single master, in an attempt to reduce the average set-up time per order. Another strategy for controlling cost, employed by printers of products such as invitations, office stationery, and address labels, is to offer customers a limited selection of papers,
15 formats and colors from which to choose.

 Printing costs per MSI are much lower for high-volume high-quality full-color publishing and packaging print jobs, e.g., food labels, consumer good packaging, magazines, catalogues and high volume marketing materials. Publishing and packaging printing is generally done using large, expensive offset printing presses (either web
20 press or sheet feeding of large-format paper stock) in a highly automated large-volume manufacturing environment. Because these presses have high set-up and amortization costs, their use has been focused on long print runs that are typical in the packaging and publishing segments of the printing market.

 Attempts have been made to reduce the high cost of short-run printing. Set-up
25 costs may be reduced by using rapid changeover production machinery, digital technologies, thermographic printing, or single-color offset printing. Typically, these techniques assume that each print job is to be processed as a discrete production run subject to economies of scale based on the quantity of that print job.

 Another approach has been to preprint high volumes of a standard base product
30 (e.g., invitation "blanks" bearing high quality color graphics) using high quality offset printing, and then to overprint variable, custom text (e.g., the text of the invitation) for

each order, typically using simpler printing processes and conventional short run printing methods.

Yet another approach has been to reduce the cost of setting up a print job by letting the customer, or an intermediary other than the printer, be responsible for the layout, sales and administration aspects of the customer's order. For example, some
5 companies, such as Hallmark, have provided WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") terminals at which a customer can view a WYSIWYG display of the item to be printed, and then upload information regarding the print job to a local or remote printing site. Another example of this approach is desktop publishing software, which
10 allows a customer to design a print job on-screen.

Computers have been used to reduce cost and improve efficiency of printing processes, e.g., to make the process of page layout, proofing, approvals and transmission to the printing floor more efficient. For example, in the newspaper and printing industries, on-the-fly page markups have been sent directly to the production
15 floor using digital workflow technology. Prepress software and equipment that automates workflow is also used by printers and graphics professionals. Recently, Internet companies such as Noosh and Impresse have been providing services that improve the efficiency of buyer-seller transactions involving printing, e.g., by giving users of their websites the ability to "connect" with a wide variety of print vendors,
20 from short-run demand printers to long-run offset printers.

SUMMARY

The invention features method for managing print jobs.

In one aspect, the invention features a method including (a) accumulating discrete print jobs electronically from respective customers, (b) aggregating the discrete
25 print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate print jobs being printable at one time on units of an integral print medium, and (b) electronically distributing the aggregate print jobs to respective printers for printing.

Implementations of this aspect of the invention may include one or more of the following features. The integral print medium may include cut sheets of paper, or large
30 rolls of paper designed for use on offset printing web presses, e.g., rolls having roll widths of 20 inches or more. The print jobs are accumulated through web browsers. Printing of the aggregate print jobs is done during periods of otherwise unused

capacity. Each of the discrete print jobs includes a run of fewer than 5,000 copies. Printing is done on large-scale offset full-color presses. Aggregating is done automatically.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) defining a two-
5 dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to be printed, the print jobs being arranged on the grid so that at least at some different positions along each of the two dimensions of the grid are print jobs that have different content to be printed on the substrate, (b) printing the print jobs on the substrate at their respective positions defined
10 by the grid, (c) cutting the substrate to separate the print jobs, and (d) distributing at least some of the separated print jobs to different customer locations. In some implementations, the print jobs are in different formats, and all of the print jobs are printed on the substrate at one time.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including defining a two-
15 dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to cut sheets of a substrate to be printed, printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs into rectangular stacks. In some implementations, each stack
20 defines a separate print job.

The invention also features a method including defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a non-preprinted substrate to be printed, printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and
25 cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to be printed, printing the
30 print jobs in full color on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, each of the orders being received at an associated ordering time, each of the orders having an associated delivery time, the periods between the ordering times and the delivery times of at least some of the print jobs being different, aggregating a set of the print jobs that have essentially the same associated delivery time into an aggregate print job to be printed at one time on shared substrate units, and arranging for the production of the aggregate print job at a time that is just ahead of the delivery time. In some implementations, the method also includes adjusting the prices of the discrete print jobs based on the period between the ordering time and the delivery time. The method may also include arranging for the production during periods of unused printing capacity.

The invention also features a method including offering the printing of discrete print jobs to customers in at least two different service levels, one of the service levels including printing the print jobs free for the customers and another of the service levels including charging for the print jobs, receiving orders from customers for print jobs at selected service levels, and aggregating a set of the print jobs for printing at one time on shared substrate units. The service levels may be associated with speed of turnaround, and/or with the presence or absence of third-party advertising on the print job.

In yet another aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, electronically creating and accumulating non-commodity information associated with each of the print jobs, aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one time on shared substrate units, and arranging for the production of the aggregate print job using commodity supplies and services including non-preprinted paper as the common substrate, and commodity inks. The arranging for production may include locating printers having unused capacity suitable for the aggregate print job.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, automating the generation of non-commodity information associated with the print jobs, aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one time on shared substrate units, and arranging for production of the aggregate print job in accordance with the non-commodity information. The non-commodity information may include at least one of content,

approval service, price, delivery terms, color verification services, quantity, and set up steps.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, defining an aggregate print job comprising a set
5 of the discrete print jobs for printing at one time on shared substrate units, the aggregate print job having a delivery time, enabling printers having equipment not economically suitable for completing individual ones of the discrete print jobs to bid competitively for the aggregate print job up to a time just ahead of the delivery time, and awarding the aggregate print job to one of the printers prior to the delivery time. The enabling and
10 awarding may be done electronically.

The invention also features a method including (a) receiving information defining discrete print jobs each of which is alone economically unfeasible for printing on high volume printing equipment, (b) aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate printing jobs being configured for printing at
15 one time on units of a common substrate, the aggregate print jobs being economically feasible for printing on high volume printing equipment, each of the aggregate printing jobs having a defined delivery time, (c) making the aggregate print jobs available up to just before the delivery time, for competitive bidding by printers having the high volume printing equipment, and (d) awarding each of the aggregate print jobs to the
20 printer with the most competitive bid based on predetermined criteria.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) using a high volume printing machine to produce high volume print jobs, each of the high volume print jobs comprising printing of only a large number of identical images one after the other, (b) determining the availability, between high volumes print jobs, of unused
25 printing capacity, (c) bidding for aggregate print jobs that can be produced economically on the high volume printing machine using the unused printing capacity, each of the aggregate print jobs comprising an aggregation of discrete print jobs that would be economically unfeasible to print separately using the printing machine, and (d) printing at least one of the aggregate print jobs.

30 In a further aspect, the invention features a method including performing graphic design of a discrete print job on a design application that runs on a web browser, transferring the print job to a web server for storage after the graphic design is

performed, modifying the print job on the web browser, and updating the print job on the web server after the modifying is done.

The invention also features a method including aggregating discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs to be produced on units of a common substrate, all of the
5 aggregate print jobs conforming to a standard format, transmitting the aggregate print jobs to a printer electronically, and, at the printer, configuring printing equipment for producing different ones of the aggregate print jobs using the same steps.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) defining a standard template format for containing common graphical information that relates to
10 different discrete print jobs, (b) providing a design tool to enable a designer to create a template that complies with the standard template format and embodies the common graphical information, (c) enabling the designer to deliver the template to a server electronically, (d) enabling users at client machines to use the template to generate different discrete print jobs that conform to the template and include custom graphical
15 information specific to each of the discrete print jobs, and (e) aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs for printing at one time on units of shared substrate.

In yet another aspect, the invention features a method including aggregating discrete high-quality full color print jobs into a single aggregate print job, printing the
20 single aggregate print job using standard process colors and standard un-pre-printed paper on high speed printing equipment, and distributing the aggregate print jobs in electronic files.

The invention also features a method including (a) digitally aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job to be printed at one time on units of a standard
25 shared substrate, the aggregate print job being defined in a standard compressed prepress data format, (b) sending the aggregate print job to a workstation at a printing site, at the printing site, Raster Image Processing the aggregate print job to create standard color separations, (c) using a computer-to-plate process to create plates based on the color separations, (d) loading the plates onto a high volume press in accordance
30 with a standard predefined protocol, (e) loading units of the standard shared substrate onto the press, (f) printing the aggregate print job onto the standard shared substrate, (g) cutting apart the standard shared substrate units to separate the discrete print jobs, and (h) forwarding the discrete print jobs to different customer destinations.

The invention also features a method including (a) aggregating discrete print jobs into a digital aggregate print job to be printed at one time on units of a standard shared substrate, the placement of the discrete printing jobs within the aggregate print job being defined by a digital aggregation template that represents the locations of cuts
5 that will be needed to separate the discrete print jobs from the aggregate print job, (b) placing a physical embodiment of the aggregation template on the units of the standard shared substrate, and (c) using the physical embodiment of the aggregation template as a guide to making cuts to separate the discrete print jobs. The aggregate print job may include a plurality of aggregated sheets, and be identified by an identifier printed on
10 each aggregated sheet within the aggregate print job. Information printed on the aggregation template may be used to automatically identify each discrete print job.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job, (b) printing the aggregate print job at a printing site, (c) separating the discrete print jobs by cutting apart the aggregate print
15 jobs, (d) electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using a print job identifier, (e) at the printing site placing the print jobs into shipment bins of a parcel carrier that tracks shipments electronically using a shipment identifier, (f) associating the print job identifier with the parcel carrier's shipment identifier, and
20 (g) enabling customers of the discrete print jobs to track the progress of delivery of their discrete print jobs electronically.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including (a) aggregating discrete print jobs of respective customers into an aggregate print job, (b) printing the aggregate print job at a printing site, (c) separating the discrete print jobs by cutting
25 apart the aggregate print jobs, (d) electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using a print job identifier, (e) shipping the discrete print jobs essentially as soon as they are printed, cut and packaged, (f) electronically billing the customers in response to completion of the printing and delivery of the discrete print jobs to a shipper for shipment.

The invention also features a method including printing an aggregate print job,
30 cutting the aggregate print job apart to form different discrete print jobs, automatically printing shipping labels for shipping the different discrete print jobs to different respective customers, and applying the labels to the different discrete print jobs in accordance with identifiers on the labels.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including (a) providing different kinds of entry ports into a print job execution system, each of the entry ports enabling a user to create interactively a full color print job in accordance with a pre-defined design template, (b) at each of the ports, generating a digital print job file based
5 on the design template and design input of the user, all of the print job files being expressed in a standard design data format, (c) routing all of the digital print job files electronically to an aggregation system, (d) at the aggregation system, assembling selected ones of the digital print job files into aggregate print jobs, all of the aggregate print jobs being expressed in a standard prepress format, and (e) routing different ones
10 of the aggregate print jobs electronically to different printers for printing.

The invention also features an apparatus that includes (a) web browsers configured for interactive design by users of discrete print jobs, (b) a central storage for information about the discrete print jobs that results from interaction with the users, (c)
15 a scalable group of web servers that interact with the web browsers and with the central storage, and (d) a scalable group of printing servers configured to aggregate the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs and deliver the aggregate print jobs electronically to printers.

Among the advantages of the invention, short run print jobs can be printed using high-quality, large-volume printing equipment, while reducing printing cost
20 significantly, improving print job quality as compared to alternative short run printing processes, and improving capacity utilization of the printing equipment. In some implementations, the printing cost is less than 10%, or even less than 5%, of the cost of printing an identical item using traditional short run printing techniques. Some implementations also provide a fast possible turnaround time from when the customer
25 places an order until the customer's print job is done, e.g., less than two hours, and allow queuing of print jobs so that expedited print jobs are printed first and lower priority print jobs are printed later. A large number of customers with short-run print jobs can be served by a relatively small number of industrial print subcontractors, to achieve end-to-end automation and aggregation of the print jobs.

30 Each customer can design a print job directly on a web browser and, if desired, upload the customer's own graphics, e.g., a logo design. Use of the web browser based design capability can replace or enhance traditional methods of graphic design, in which a graphic designer translates a customer's sketch and/or verbal description into a

finished design and provides one or more proofs for the customer's approval prior to printing.

The invention allows the printing subcontractors' production floors to be organized and operated in a manner consistent with the best-in-class practices for high-volume, high quality publishing and packaging printers, despite the fragmented nature of the custom printing jobs involved. The invention also features a scalable systems architecture, to allow the systems of the invention to accommodate higher volumes of customers and/or printing jobs. Based on real time information provided by printers, order flow can be redirected to those printers who, at a given moment in time, have excess production capacity and are willing to sell that capacity at a price lower than their "fully loaded" production cost.

Customer orders can consist of a variety of document types, layouts and quantities, for a potentially infinite range of order characteristics. Yet the traditionally high cost of managing this variability of order characteristics is reduced or eliminated through a conversion of the variability into a consistently formatted, repetitive stream of pre and post press digital information that is compatible with printing industry standards. Groups of customers (e.g., multiple customers within a single company) are able to share and centrally control common document characteristics (e.g., a template for a brochure layout or a business card design that is shared by multiple persons within the same company), while decentralizing individual purchase decisions, order entry and modifications to text or other variable elements within the documents.

Based on market information and printer information, received both previously and in "real time", the web server host can modify the price, delivery, and product options that are offered to a given customer or set of customers. For instance, if excess production capacity will be available in the next several hours, printers may be willing to temporarily cut their wholesale price in order to fill the near-term capacity, and the web server host could, in response, immediately modify the offers displayed to customers via the Internet so as to increase demand. There is no incremental (marginal/variable) cost to processing a customer's order in a very rapid time (e.g., two hours), and the system allows real time rescheduling of order queues to manage capacity fluctuations. This allows the web server host to charge a higher price for expedited orders without incurring additional cost to provide the expedited service.

Other features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the description and drawings.

DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

Figs. 1, 1A, and 1B are schematic block diagrams of a system according to one implementation of the invention. Figs. 1A and 1B are the top and bottom halves, respectively, of one diagram.

Figs. 2-2A are schematic top views of layouts of print jobs.

Fig. 3 is a flow diagram illustrating the designing of a print job on a web browser.

Figs. 4-4W are webpages according to one implementation.

Fig. 5 is a schematic diagram showing connection of elements of the system.

Fig. 6 is a flow diagram of a printing and post-press process.

Fig. 7 is a schematic diagram showing the farm configuration of servers in a system according to one implementation.

Fig. 8 is a schematic diagram showing a queue processing system.

DESCRIPTION

Implementations of the invention include interrelated elements. These elements and their relationships will first be discussed briefly and then later in more detail.

An implementation of a print job management system 10 is shown schematically in Figs. 1, 1A, and 1B. A potentially enormous number (e.g., thousands or even hundreds of thousands or millions) of individual and commercial customers 12, wishing to place orders for discrete print jobs (generally short run printing jobs, i.e., jobs of less than 40,000 units, typically 250-5,000 units), access the Internet 14 via web browsers 13 (or similar interactive communication software) running on personal computers or other electronic devices 11. Customers can access the system through any one of several different types of entry ports 15 into the print job management system, where some types of entry ports may be characterized by their economic and market characteristics. The types of entry ports could include home office/small office computer entry ports 15a, intermediary ports (such as boutique stationery stores) 15b, and large corporate entry ports 15c (such as a Communications Department of a large corporation). Other entry ports need not be based on web browsers, but could be, for

example email links 15d and dial up voice telephone lines 15e. The system can also be integrated with bidding systems or "eHub" bidding sites such as Noosh, Impresse, Collabria and Ariba (eHub portals 15f).

The term "print job" refers to an individual print job, such as a single design version of a brochure for a business in a given quantity such as 1000 brochures. The term "order" is used to refer to a group of print jobs that are ordered at the same time, such as a business card, letterhead, and envelopes for a business. For some customers, individual print jobs could be part of a large corporate communication program that would include hundreds of different documents each bearing common graphic elements and custom text associated with each document.

Through the Internet 14, each customer can access a website 16, that includes a website studio 16a which provides design software that is made available from a central web server 18. The website studio, which will be discussed in further detail below, allows each customer to design one or more custom printing jobs, e.g., business cards, brochures, postcards, folders, letterhead, and envelopes. The customer chooses from a limited selection of standardized papers, formats (provided to the user in the form of templates with user-specified data fields), colors and quantities. The website studio software is downloaded from the server as part of web pages displayed to the user, runs on the user's browser, and enables the user to perform simple design functions by completing a selected template using a Design Wizard, or more complex design functions using a Design Studio, locally on his browser. Typically, only the results of the design process are uploaded to the server as a print job. The templates are created using an XML format or other appropriate format. Alternatively, a customer or a professional designer could generate his own template, using the website studio itself, or using desktop publishing software, and upload it to the server website studio.

As shown in Fig. 1, two kinds of data pass back and forth between the customers and the system, and there are two series of processes that handle this data. The data can be categorized as graphical print data 115 (in Fig. 1, graphical print job data 117, templates 119 and web studio software 121), and commercial print job data 123. Processing of this data is split into two pieces: what goes on between the customers and the system, shown in Fig. 1A, and what goes on between the system and the printers, shown in Fig. 1B. As shown in Fig. 1, there is storage at various points in the system to store the data. For example, some of it is stored in the customer's PC

storage 111, some in the system's data storage 20/22, and some at the printer data storage 113.

The system's data storage is shown in more detail in Fig. 1A. The data input by a customer when an order is placed is stored in a central database 20 and/or a network storage 22, depending on the nature of the data, as will be discussed below. The network storage 22 stores all of the graphic files that define a print job, e.g., logos, fonts, backgrounds, layouts and frame designs, while the central database 20 stores, among other things, all of the non-graphical information, e.g., the text to be printed and the business information that is needed to get the jobs printed and delivered. The central database 20 also stores information regarding the customer, e.g., the customer's name and address, and stores the non-graphical elements of the website studio templates (the graphical elements that are stored in the network storage are referenced by the templates and document layouts).

Once the customer has finished designing the print job the customer places an order, e.g., using a Purchase Wizard 16b, as discussed below. The customer's print job is sent to the server in XML format, and the XML file is then converted by the server into a digital format, e.g., into a PostScript file 128 (Fig. 1B). The backend printing servers 28 then automatically aggregate, or "gang together", the customer's PostScript file with multiple PostScript files from other customers to produce a consolidated print sheet (a "layout"). To achieve this, the backend servers assemble the individual PostScript files to create the layout 130 (Fig. 1B), with different individual print jobs arranged on respective portions of the layout. For example, as shown in Fig. 2, 133 different business card print jobs 50 of identical size could be aggregated into a layout and printed on a single large printing sheet 52, e.g., a large format printing sheet measuring 1.0 meter by 0.6 meter. In other examples, different sizes and shapes of print jobs can be aggregated, e.g., as shown in Fig. 2A and discussed below. The organization of the different print jobs on the layout 130 is defined by aggregation templates that characterize where cuts need to be made after printing in order to separate the different print jobs. The choice of which print jobs to place onto a given layout and in what arrangement is discussed below.

The commercial information related to the customer's order (e.g., the shipping address, shipping date, etc.) is stored in a customer information file 132 (Fig. 1B). The customer information file 132 is aggregated with other customer's files (the same

customers whose PostScript files have been aggregated onto the layout), to create an aggregate meta file 134 which contains all of the commercial information for the customers' print jobs. The aggregate meta file 134 also includes commercial information relating to the printing run, e.g., a batch number ("template layout
5 reference number"), the number of sheets to be printed, and the cutting template to be used to cut the printed sheets into individual printed print jobs.

The aggregate meta file is posted by the backend server to a website 136 that is accessible to printing firms 138 wishing to sell their printing services to the web server host. The aggregate meta file 134 includes the commercial details of the print run that
10 will be performed using the PostScript layout file 130 (e.g., number of sheets, type of paper, and deadline). As will be discussed below, printing firms with unused capacity bid for a contract to print the print run. Generally, the contract is automatically awarded to the bidder providing the most competitive bid based on predetermined criteria, e.g., lead time, quality, history, price or other factors. The successful bidder's
15 contractual obligations, and the PostScript layout file and aggregate meta file, are then transmitted by the backend server to that printing firm, e.g., to a server 32 located at the printing site.

The PostScript layout file is converted at the printing facility 29, during RIPing (Raster Image Processing), to the color separated prepress format that is used by
20 standard computer-to-plate systems that produce four-color photolithographic plates 110 (Fig. 1B) for use on automated large scale offset printing presses 30. By large scale offset printing presses we mean either (a) sheet-fed presses with sheet formats of 530x740 or larger and straight printing rates of 12,000 sheets per hour or higher, or (b) web presses with roll widths of 20 inches or higher and printing rates of 40,000 iph
25 (inches per hour). Large scale offset printing presses include, e.g., Heidelberg, Speedmaster, and other similar or larger printing press production systems.) The server 32 provides a browser interface for use by people who operate the printing presses ("print operators"). Information about how to set up and perform each of the print runs is provided in a simple format to the print operators through the browser interface, as
30 discussed below. The plates are used to print a desired number of copies on a standard printing paper that is loaded by the print operator using standard four-color process inks, based on meta file information that is provided by the backend printing server to the operator on a web-browser based computer display 32 at the operator's station.

The printed sheets are then transferred to a cutting station 140 (Fig. 1B), where they are cut and sorted into individual print jobs 142, as will be discussed below. In some implementations (such as for presentation folders or envelopes) additional post-print processing is performed such as folding and/or gluing. The orders are then
5 immediately shipped to the respective customers, using shipping information that is displayed on a computer display 34 in the shipping area of the printing facility.

Most customers "pre-pay" (e.g., provide their credit card billing information) upon placing their orders. Some corporate customers may be invoiced. Generally, the customer's credit card is not debited until after the customer's order has been shipped.
10 The backend printing server sends a meta file 144 back to the web server after a shipment has been made, informing the web server of the status of each customer's order. Once an order has been successfully shipped, the backend server interacts with a processing center 146 so that the customer's account will be debited, or, in the case of a corporate customer, sends the corporation an invoice.

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Customer Interface with the Internet

The only requirement for use of the print job management system by a customer who is accessing the system through one of the types of browser-based entry ports described above is a computer that is linked to the Internet by a standard recent web
20 browser, e.g., Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher. The customer accesses the website 16 by entering the website URL address into the browser. Other entry ports do not even require that the customer have access to a browser, e.g., a dial-up voice telephone link 15e could be used to enter information by voice or punching keys on the telephone keypad.

25 The design and order process is conducted through the website. The rest of the system is "invisible" to the customer. The customer's order is printed and delivered to the customer without any requirement for further interaction, although the customer may use the website to track the progress of the order through the printing process and the shipment of the order to the customer.

30

The Website Studio

The website studio allows the customer to design his own print job, using the browser for design selection and editing. The website studio uses a user-friendly "what

you see is what you get" ("WYSIWYG") functionality that allows the customer to choose a base design for a desired printed item (e.g., business card or stationery), and then edit the design. The functionality is similar to that of existing desktop word processing publishing products, making the website easy for most customers to use.

5 As shown in Fig. 3, using the browser and the Design Wizard portion of the website studio the customer can choose a printed item from a wide selection (e.g., business cards, letterhead, invitations, brochures and marketing materials), choose basic options such as page orientation (portrait or landscape), view a variety of design templates that are available for the item and choose one, complete the template (e.g., by
10 supplying new text, uploading graphics files and adjusting fonts), and save the resulting design. The customer can then add the item to his shopping cart, place an order, or perform further design modifications using the Design Studio portion of the website studio. The design process will be described in further detail below with reference to Figs. 4-4O. Once the customer is satisfied with the design, the customer can add the
15 design to his shopping cart as a print job, and use the Purchase Wizard, discussed below with reference to Figs. 4P-4W, or other purchase function, to place an on-line order and pre-pay for the order over a secure connection.

The customer is offered a relatively limited selection of standard papers, to allow easy and cost efficient aggregation of print jobs and printer set-up, as will be
20 discussed below. Customers also select from certain predetermined print quantities, e.g., multiples of 250 units (250, 500, 1000, etc.).

The procedure described above would be followed by a customer entering the system from his individual PC. If other entry ports are used, for example an intermediary port 15b, some of these steps may be bypassed, e.g., the customer may not
25 use a Purchase Wizard to place and pay for the order.

Figs. 4-4O show webpages from a website studio used in one implementation of the invention. To begin the design process, the customer first navigates from a home page (not shown), to the Design Wizard (Figs. 4-4E). The Design Wizard is configured to appear to the customer like a standard Windows® Wizard application, e.g., with
30 "back", "next" and "finish" buttons, giving the customer a feeling of familiarity and user-friendliness. In the Design Wizard, the customer selects the item that the customer wishes to design (e.g., business cards or other items, in Figs. 4-4E). For business card design, the Design Wizard includes a Welcome screen (Fig. 4), an Orientation screen

(Fig. 4A) that allows the customer to choose between horizontal and vertical cards, a Template Browser screen (Fig. 4B) that allows the customer to choose between a variety of different design templates (not shown), an Information screen (Fig. 4C) at which the customer fills in a number of fields to complete the selected design template with the customer's information, and Review screens (Figs. 4D and 4E) that allow the customer to review the front and back of the resulting business card. After reviewing the card, the customer can decide to (a) go back and edit the card, (b) go to the Checkout (the Purchase Wizard described below), or (c) go to the Design Studio to perform more complicated design functions (e.g., changing fonts and color schemes).

10 A Design Studio used in one implementation of the invention is shown in Figs. 4F-4O. When the customer opens the Design Studio, the customer will first see an initial screen (Fig. 4F) with a loading bar, indicating the status of the downloading of the Design Studio to the customer's browser. Each time something (e.g., a font) is downloaded to the customer's browser from the web server, a similar loading bar will be provided. The Design Studio is configured to have toolbars and other features that are similar to those used in standard word processing and desktop publishing user interfaces, so that again the customer will have a feeling of familiarity with the software and will find the software easy to use. In the case of the loading bar, the user is comfortable with the notion that the application is loading even though it is not being
15 loading in the usual sense of being moved from a hard disk to memory in the user's computer. The Design Studio also includes a standard "Startup Tips" dialog box (Fig. 4G), like other Windows® applications, and a Help system.

In the Design Studio, the customer can select a background from a variety of choices (Fig. 4H), use a "picker" dropdown list (Fig. 4I) to select other design features (logos, card layouts, color schemes, designs and fonts), modify those design features, add a logo (Fig. 4I), select a color scheme (Fig. 4J), change the color of selected text (Fig. 4K), change the properties of an image, e.g., the logo (Fig. 4L), view the backside of the card (Fig. 4M), and preview exactly how the front and back of the printed card will look (Figs. 4N and 4O). The Design Studio features in-place editing, i.e., the
25 customer can double-click on an item and change it directly. While in the Design Studio, the customer can make as many modifications to the fonts, colors, card layout, etc., as desired. The customer can also choose to view the design at low resolution, medium resolution or high resolution. In some implementations, the customer can add

text or graphics to the back of the card, in which case in most implementations the existing "advertisement" text is automatically removed and this removal is automatically chosen as a purchase option in the Purchase Wizard. The customer can also choose a blank back side as a purchase option.

5 If desired, a customer using the Design Studio can upload a graphic file, e.g., containing the customer's logo. The file can be, e.g., created using graphic design software, downloaded from the Internet, taken with a digital camera, or scanned in with an image scanner. Generally, the file should have a relatively high resolution, e.g., at least 300 dpi. Most standard graphics file types are supported. The customer's graphic
10 file is stored in network storage 22, and is referenced by the XML file created by the customer in the website studio and added to the PostScript file for the customer's print job when the PostScript file is created.

When the customer is satisfied with the design of the card, the customer can proceed to the checkout (the Purchase Wizard), or can save the finished design (the
15 customer's print job) for later purchase. In either case, the customer's print job is saved in XML format in the central database 20. The XML file includes the size and orientation of the document, the number of pages, and, for each page, the margins, background, frame design (if any), and the text and graphics elements on the page and their characteristics (color, font, size, etc.).

20 The website studio is designed for use by customers who have no graphic arts experience or specialized software knowledge, e.g., small business owners who want to "do it all" and workers in companies whose goal is to update information, such as the company address or telephone number, prior to ordering or reordering printed materials.

25 For users with graphic design experience and desktop publishing software, the web server provides a full toolset that is compatible with leading desktop publishing software such as Quark Express and Adobe InDesign software. Thus, a print job can be designed by a graphic artist, using professional desktop publishing software, and then uploaded to the web server for distributed access to other users at the customer
30 company. For example, the graphic artist can define fixed and variable fields, and an administrator or other designated employees at the company can then be given access to input information (e.g., company address and telephone) into the variable fields, without changing the fixed fields (e.g., the overall design and graphics of the print job).

As a result, customers having access to desktop publishing software can create their own templates, rather than being limited to the templates offered by the web server host. When the template is uploaded to the web server, it is split into graphic data (logos, fonts, backgrounds and designs) and all other data. The graphic data remains in
5 its original format and is stored in network storage 22, as discussed above. The remaining data and layout information is converted to XML format and stored in the central database 20.

Unlike other previous, server-based approaches, the website studio utilizes browser-based processing to allow high-speed processing when the customer is
10 working interactively to design a print job. The website studio utilizes Javascript and DHTML technologies for the graphic design by the customer, i.e., the web pages that the customer receives and views include not only the static visual display, but also graphic design programs (the website studio) that will run on the customer's browser just as any other application runs on a computer. Thus, the customer can use the
15 browser interface to do graphical design without interacting with, and thus consuming the resources of, the web server.

So that the website studio can be quickly downloaded by the customer, in most implementations the graphic elements, e.g., fonts, backgrounds and logos, used in the website studio are stored in a library in the network storage 22, a copy of which is
20 stored at the printing firm information system 29, as will be discussed below. Thus, a graphic element need only be downloaded by the web server to the browser when it is selected by the customer during the design process. The XML file that results from the design process (the customer's print job) will reference the appropriate information in the centrally stored library. The library is replicated at the printing firms, so that the
25 graphic elements can be inserted during RIPing using OPI (Open Prepress Interface) techniques. The library can be distributed periodically using a CD-ROM publication or other distribution approach so that all parties to the system are working from the same library.

Post-design processes, such as high resolution proofing and processing files, are
30 queued separately and processed by the backend servers independently of the web server, because the customer is not waiting for these processes to be completed and thus processing speed is not a concern.

The web studio may also include a dynamic shopping cart, which allows the customer to access the shopping cart at any time during the design process to add or delete items.

The web studio application is based on modules, to provide an open
5 development architecture. Different modules are plugged into the core libraries to provide additional functionalities, e.g., the Undo/Redo History Manager is a separate module that could be deactivated, by removing a few links, or replaced by a new and more powerful module complying with the same architecture as the current module.

The web studio application uses style sheets to "style" the interface into a usual
10 Windows®-like interface. Using style sheets allows the application to have a smaller overall size, as styling policy is centralized in a few modules that are reused in the application's web pages. Providing a centralized styling policy also allows the web server host to change the look and feel of the web studio interface at any time, just by changing the styles.

15 In one implementation, the modules use Internet Explorer XML DOM implementations. Using these functionalities, a real-time renderer can be created which will take any XML document and, using XML style-sheets (XSL) transform the document into a WYSIWYG preview. The use of these integrated functionalities allows a small and fast rendering/edition engine.

20 Using HTCs (HTML components), scalability and processing speed can be enhanced. Also, the web studio application can be designed to behave differently on the result of the XSL transformation, just by using a different previewing style sheet (CSS). Thus, after rendering, the resulting preview can be a simple "flat" preview, or an editable document that the user can interact with.

25 If the XML Document model is extended to VML (Vector Markup Language), the web site studio is then able to render documents created by most common office applications, e.g., Microsoft Word. The user can then modify such a document and send it to the webserver for printing. This feature enhances the compatibility of the web studio with usual Windows® applications. Extension of the XML document
30 model to VML also allows the web studio application to draw more complex shapes (e.g., ovals, rounded rectangles and curves), apply color gradients and color schemes to complex objects, and use transformations, making it possible for a user to design and

print complex documents to suit his or her needs.

The Purchase Wizard

A Purchase Wizard used in one implementation of the invention is shown in
5 Figs. 4P-4W. Like the Design Wizard, the Purchase Wizard appears to the customer as
a standard Windows Wizard application. The Wizard may be configured to run on the
user's browser, or on the web server, depending on the preference and resources of the
web server host. The final purchase information is transmitted over a secure server
connection. The Wizard includes a Welcome screen (Fig. 4P), a Review screen (Fig.
10 4Q) that gives the customer a final opportunity to review the design, an Address screen
(Fig. 4R) that allows the customer to input a shipping address and select an order
quantity, one or more Options screens that offer the customer choices of upgrades, e.g.,
to remove the advertising text on the reverse side (Fig. 4S), a Delivery screen (Fig. 4T)
that allows the customer to select delivery options, e.g., expedited delivery, a screen
15 that notifies the customer that the order is being submitted to the server (Fig. 4U), a
Billing Information screen that allows the customer to input billing information (Fig.
4V), and a Payment Confirmation screen that asks the customer for final confirmation
of the order.

Once an order has been placed, the server stores the customer's order
20 information into the central database 20, including the commercial information
regarding the customer's order.

In some implementations, relatively low cost items, e.g., business cards, are
offered to customers by the web server host at no charge. The cost of printing these
items can be recouped by the web server host by charging a fee for upgrades, e.g.,
25 faster delivery, and sales of complementary items such as business card cases. For
example, as discussed above, the web server host may include an advertisement (e.g.,
"Free Business Cards at www.vistaprint.com") on the back of each free card, and
charge a fee if the customer does not wish this advertisement to appear on the
customer's cards.

30 For all orders, the web server host may, if desired, charge additional fees for
enhancements such as expedited service and gloss or other special finishes.

Customers can obtain support through the website by visiting a FAQ
("frequently asked questions") or help page (not shown). In some implementations,

the website will also offer interactive online support, support via email, and/or a toll-free number that customers can call for telephone support. If desired by the website host, access to interactive online support, email and telephone support may be restricted to certain preferred customers, e.g., corporate customers having accounts with the website host. Alternatively, the website host may offer these services to all customers at no charge or may charge a fee for access.

As discussed above, the customer can access the website studio using his own computer and browser, or can use another type of entry port, e.g., an intermediary port 15b (such as a terminal at a boutique stationery store), or a large corporate entry port 15c (such as a Communications Department of a large corporation). The entry port need not be based on a web browser, but could be, for example, an email link or dial up telephone line. The customer may use the website studio without assistance, or may describe the desired print job to someone else, e.g., a graphic designer or salesperson at the boutique stationery store, who will use the website studio to design the print job.

The Web Server

In some types of entry port, the web server provides the interaction of the customer with the web studio. The web server uses a typical three-tier architecture to respond to all of the customer page requests, by using server-side scripting to access server objects that implement the business logic, these objects in turn interacting with the central database and network storage to access the necessary data.

Data Storage

Hundreds of thousands (potentially millions) of customer relationships are managed by the system. Each customer order typically involves a relatively large file due to the nature of color graphic printing data. The data storage capacity of the system is robust enough to handle high levels of data storage and data access. The data storage is also capable of acting as a link between the front end at which orders are placed, the design studio, the backend printing servers, and shipping, accounting and marketing systems. A data storage system that is capable of meeting these requirements is an Oracle RDBMS running on a Unix box or a Microsoft SQL Server 7.

All data is stored in either the central database 20 or the network storage 22. Stored data includes business-related information such as information pertaining to customers and orders, and design data specific to each customer's print job.

Network storage 22 includes one or more network attached storage (NAS) systems, and is configured to store all graphical objects that are used by the Design Wizard and Studio and that are uploaded by customers, including logos, backgrounds, fonts and frame designs. The network storage includes a library, which contains all of the backgrounds, logos and fonts that are used by the Design Wizard and Studio. Customer uploaded information is not stored in the library. The library is replicated and sent to each of the printing firms used by the system for print runs, and the contents of the library are referenced by the PostScript layout files sent to the printing firms. The network storage may also contain the web pages used in the website 16.

A very large amount of data is stored in the network storage 22, e.g. up to several terabytes depending on the number of customers using the system. The network storage 22 is completely server independent (it includes its own enclosed CPU) and is directly connected to the local area network (a local area network internally operated by the web server host, including the web servers, the backend servers, and the storage devices), making the stored data available to connected servers, i.e., the web server(s) 18 and the backend printing servers 28. As of the writing of this description, a single NAS system can typically handle from 20 gigabytes to one terabyte of data. Thus, as data space needs increase more disks can be added to the NAS (this operation typically does not require a service shutdown), or, when the limit of each NAS is reached, an additional NAS can be added to the system. As shown in Fig. 5, the web servers, central database, and backend servers are connected to the network storage by an Ethernet.

Central database 20 is a relational database management system (RDBMS) that handles all non-graphical data. This database is designed to handle millions of records. As is customary, the data is organized in tabular form. In one implementation, the database includes the following tables, which include the listed fields. (More, fewer or different tables may be used in other implementations, as needed.)

| <u>Table</u> | <u>Fields</u> |
|---------------------------|--|
| Products | unique product (item) ID (i.e., the SKU #) and name, product description, list price, weight (for shipping) |
| 5 | |
| Print Jobs | unique print job ID and name, XML content of print job, SKU # of item (card, envelope, etc.), creation date, last modification date |
| 10 | |
| Templates | unique template ID and name, XML content of template, SKU # of item (card, envelope, etc.), creation date, last modification date, template category |
| 15 | |
| Template Categories | unique category ID and name, parent category ID (tree structure), category graphical representation |
| 20 | |
| Shoppers | unique shopper ID, shopper name, number of logins, last login date, email address/login ID, password |
| 25 | |
| Orders | unique order number, reference to shopper ID, order date, pricing and tax information, status of order, credit card authorization number, shipping method, shipper tracking information, customer shipping and billing information including priority of order |
| 30 | |
| Ordered Items | ordered item number, order number (from orders table), SKU # of item, quantity, pricing information, print job ID |
| 35 | |
| Shopping Carts | Same fields as Orders, but temporary storage |
| Shopping Cart Items | Same fields as Ordered items, but temporary storage |
| 30 | |
| Printer Batches (Layouts) | batch ID number, date sent, status, printer ID number and name, quantity of print run, action to be taken when layout is created (none, notify print operator, send layout to printer, notify and send) |
| 35 | |
| Printer Batch Items | batch item ID number, ordered item number (from ordered items table), batch ID number (from printer batches table), status of item |

Data stays in the database as long as it is needed by the system. Data is maintained in the Orders table after a customer's order has been completed and shipped, to facilitate reordering. To avoid overloading the database, the web server host may place a time limit on reordering, or charge the customer a nominal fee for
 5 keeping his information in the database for an extended period of time.

Each time a layout is created, an entry is created in the Layouts table. Depending on the action to be taken, the print operator may be notified by email, or an extranet query can be set up to query the table, or a process may be running at the printer that checks the table for new layouts.

10 The following status codes may be used in the "status" field in the Orders table:

| Status Code | Value | Status description |
|---------------|-------|--|
| ST_READY | 0 | The order has been submitted by the customer but at this point has not been processed. |
| ST_PROCESSING | 1 | This order is being processed. |
| ST_CANCELLED | 2 | This order has been cancelled. |
| ST_REPEAT | 3 | There was a problem with this order so it has been re-submitted. This code is treated by the system in the same way as an "unprocessed" order. (Re-submitted orders can only be re-submitted a few times before a warning is raised) |
| ST_DISPATCHED | 4 | This order has been dispatched and the tracking information has been updated. |
| ST_COMPLETED | 5 | The customer's credit card has been charged. This order has now been completed. |

15 ***Order Queuing, Prepress Aggregation and Data Conversion***

Prepress aggregation is performed by a prepress aggregation module of the backend printing server, which includes a multi-user PostScript file creator, shown as item 200 in Fig. 8. The file creator collects all of the print jobs that have been received by the web server and queued for printing. The file creator includes four queue-

processing components, as follows. The first component 202 creates individual PostScript files 204 for each customer's design, and individual meta files 206, referenced to each customer's PostScript file, that contain job tracking information and other commercial information related to the customer's order. The second component 5 208 collects these PostScript files, according to aggregation parameters (e.g., job tracking information and size of the printing paper to be used), and aggregates (or "gangs") them to produce a PostScript file 210 that contains "N-up" designs, the value of N being dependent on the design size, the paper size, and the exact layout required due to requirements such as edge bleed. The third component 212 does an automatic 10 "pre-flight check" on each aggregated PostScript file, thus avoiding the need for further manual intervention. The fourth component 214 optimizes production scheduling and routes the final aggregated PostScript file to a Raster Image Processor (RIP) 220 at the printing cell.

The print jobs are arranged spatially on the master, rather than in chronological 15 order. As a result, several types of items can be aggregated and arranged on a single layout, e.g., postcards, invitations and business cards. For example, as shown in Fig. 2A, the layout can include business cards 50, postcards 53 and invitations 55. If any of the aggregated print jobs are to be printed on both sides, the entire layout will be printed on both sides, with blank areas for any print jobs that are printed only on one 20 side. Some items, e.g., envelopes, generally cannot be aggregated with other types of items because of their specific post-press processing requirements.

Aggregation may be performed in accordance with one of a number of standard aggregation templates, as noted above, or can be done "on the fly", in any arrangement that will fit within the bounds of the paper sheet to be printed. The prepress 25 aggregation module, a rules-based program, aggregates print jobs by scanning the Ordered Items table of the central database and searching for items (print jobs) that have the same printing requirements, e.g., the same delivery date, paper grade, and post press processing requirements. Scanning generally continues until enough print jobs have been located to fill a layout of a given size. The XML files corresponding to the 30 selected print jobs are then pulled from the Document Table, converted to PostScript files and aggregated, as discussed above.

Printing is generally performed in a base print run of a standard number of sheets, e.g., 250 sheets. The prepress aggregation module automatically deals with a

print quantity that is greater than the number of sheets in the base print run by allocating that print file to one or more extra position(s) on the consolidated sheet (master). For example, if the base print run is 250 sheets and a customer orders a print quantity of 500, the customer's design would occupy two positions on the master,

5 whereas if the customer orders a print quantity of 1000 four positions would be occupied. The prepress aggregation module is also able to differentiate between these different quantity orders, and thus when sufficient order volume is being generated at, e.g., 500 units, the module will create a print file with each order occupying only a single position and increase the base print run to 500 sheets, further reducing unit cost.

10 Also, in the unlikely event that insufficient orders are received over a period of time, one or more position(s) on the master may be left blank.

In some implementations, the prepress aggregation module is configured to provide digital management of queues to allow a customer to choose to have his order expedited for an additional cost. Expedited orders are queued ahead of non-expedited

15 orders, so that non-expedited orders will be printed later, e.g., 5-7 days later, than expedited orders which are printed immediately. As a result, all orders can be shipped immediately after printing, without the need for the printing firm to sort out and hold back non-expedited orders. If there are a few particularly high priority jobs waiting to be printed, the program will aggregate these jobs and send them to be printed

20 immediately, without waiting for enough orders to be received to fill a layout.

The Backend Printing Interface

The backend printing servers do not interact directly with the customers. The backend printing servers do the processing (e.g., print job aggregation and printer

25 preparation and optimization) that occurs after the customers have designed the print job and placed orders. Generally, communications between the backend printing servers and the print subcontractors are handled over dedicated leased lines due to the high volume of real-time data transfer from the backend print servers to the print production floor.

30 After the print jobs have been aggregated and queued by the prepress aggregation module, as described above, the resulting layout and aggregate meta file are sent by the backend printing servers to designated printing firms. The printing firm to which the data is sent may be selected by an automated bidding process, which will

be described below. The digital data is then used to make color-separated offset printing plates in accordance with the layout. The printing plates are generally prepared in advance of the time allotted for the print run, e.g., the layout and meta file are sent at least an hour before the scheduled print run and the plates are formed
5 immediately (plate forming generally takes about 10-15 minutes or less).

Once the printing plates have been formed, the operator of the printing press loads the specified grade and quantity of printing paper for the aggregate print run, e.g., 250 sheets plus "overage" for a 250 sheet run of business cards. For this purpose, the operator refers to a browser-based terminal at his work-station, which displays
10 information from the meta file concerning the print run. The print run is then performed, resulting in the desired number of printed sheets, e.g., a stack of 250 printed sheets for a 250 sheet run. The system can organize multiple aggregate print runs that use the same paper base, thus eliminating the need for paper changes.

15 *Post-Press Processing*

Referring to Figs. 1B and 6, there are several steps that take place after a print run. These steps include cutting, post-forming (in some cases), sorting, packing and shipping. These steps are described in detail below.

Print jobs that are part of an order (e.g., letterhead) can be held until other print
20 jobs that are part of the same order (e.g., envelopes) are ready. (In some cases, the different parts of a customer's order may be printed at different printers, in which case they will be shipped separately.) In some cases shipments may also be tracked and customers informed of the location/status of their orders.

25 *Cutting and Forming*

To cut the stack of sheets into individual customers' print jobs, the operator selects an appropriate template by again referring to the terminal information, and/or by referring to a batch number (or "template-layout reference number") on the printing plate or printed in the margin area of the printed sheets (e.g., a bar code 51, Fig. 2).
30 The sheets are moved, as a stack, to a cutting station (e.g., a guillotine cutter), the template is placed on top of the stack of sheets, and the operator enters the template-layout reference number into another terminal to program the guillotine cutter (or the template-layout reference number is automatically downloaded to the terminal). The

guillotine cutter then cuts the stack of sheets, forming individual stacks of items (e.g., business cards, postcards, etc.). In high volume applications, the guillotine cutter can be replaced by automatic cutting or blanking equipment such as is used for cutting labels. While a guillotine cutter is used for most items, e.g., business cards, postcards, and other flat items), some items will require other post forming processes. For example, envelopes are formed using standard envelope forming equipment, including a hydraulic die cutter and an envelope folding and gluing machine. Because the folding and gluing machines generally require relatively high volumes (e.g., 150,000 units or more), it is necessary to accumulate the printed sheets from print runs until the necessary unit volume is reached. In order to keep track of individual print jobs, a marker is placed between each print job and the following print job. This can be accomplished, for example, by using a heavy, brightly colored cardboard sheet as the template, resulting in a brightly colored, sturdy marker at the top of each stack of printed items in a given order. The stacks of items can then be stacked and set aside, or transferred directly to the envelope folding and gluing machine and left there until there are a sufficient number of sheets to operate the machine.

Other items that require post-processing, e.g., folders, are processed using appropriate cutting and post-forming techniques, which are well known.

20 *Sorting and Shipping*

After cutting is completed, an operator refers to simple instructions displayed by a terminal, indicating how to package the items. The instructions also indicate whether certain stacks of items should be set aside until a subsequent print run has been completed, e.g., if a customer has ordered both business cards and letterhead stationery.

25 Shipping labels will be printed automatically by a printer attached to one of the browser-based terminals, allowing the operator to easily label the packages for shipping. The labels will generally include a bar code to facilitate shipping using optical-reader based systems, e.g., as used by UPS and FedEx carriers. When these carriers are used, the information scanned in by the optical reader can be used by the web server host to track the location of a shipment and, if desired, to inform a customer of the location and/or status of the customer's order. After an order has been packed and labeled, the operator can simply drop it into a carrier's bin (e.g., a UPS bin) on site.

As discussed above, most customers will have pre-paid during ordering, while some corporate customers will have accounts with the web server host, allowing invoicing and later payment. Debiting and invoicing of customers is conducted by the backend server upon receipt of a meta file from the printing facility indicating that
5 orders have been successfully shipped.

The printing facility and carrier are paid by an automated accounts payable management system after printing and shipping have been successfully completed.

System Scalability

10 Referring to Fig. 7, while a single web server is shown in Fig. 1 for clarity, the system will generally include more than one web server to accommodate a very large volume of users. For example, for volumes of up to around 2 million visits a month, the browser-based processing of the system allows for a small, dedicated print-processing server farm of fewer than 5 servers. The system may be scaled to
15 accommodate many times this amount of visits simply by adding more servers.

The servers are arranged in a "web server farm", i.e., all of the servers used are strictly identical, and the system architecture is implemented so that additional customer requests, that cannot be handled by the existing servers, can be handled by simply adding an extra identical server to the farm. The backend printing servers 28
20 are also arranged in a farm configuration.

In a farm configuration, the load is split between the available servers, so that if more servers are needed either due to overloading of the system or due to a server breaking down the load will continue to be split proportionally among the servers after one is added, removed or replaced.
25

Automated Bidding Exchange for Printing Services

As shown in Fig. 1, the web server host has supplier relationships with a number of printing firms that are equipped to receive digital data (layouts) and informational data (meta files) from the system servers. The system includes a program
30 that includes a digital database containing the meta files for each layout. The program fills customer orders by purchasing printing services based on automated real time bidding of commodity costs (i.e., paper and ink costs and/or depreciation). The printing firms bid for near-term printing services based on the capacity utilization of the

printer at the time the printing services are needed, by accessing certain parts of the program via the Internet. For instance, if a printing firm anticipates a near-term situation of unused capacity, the printing firm will generally price that time period at just above marginal (commodity) cost. The program selects the most attractive bid
5 from among the printing firms and transmits the digital data to that firm. The directing and redirecting of capacity can be done up to the very moment of production release.

The program may be configured to award a printing contract to the printing firm that is the lowest bidder, or to award the contract based on a group of selection criteria, e.g., quality, lead time, price, and history.

10 The printing firms may enter into the bidding process through a website operated by the web server host, e.g., by posting information regarding one-time availability, by posting information regarding long term availability (e.g., that a certain time slot is available every day or each week), or by responding to information regarding layouts that has been posted by the web server host. In some
15 implementations the web site is configured so that a printer will only see information pertaining to layouts that could be printed by that printer (i.e., the printer will not see information pertaining to layouts that are in a format that is larger than the format the printer's press can accommodate.)

In some cases, the bidding process will be bypassed entirely. For example, if
20 the web server has a layout that is particularly suitable for a specific printing firm, and the web server knows that the printing firm is available to print the layout, the web server may send the layout and meta files to the printing firm without putting the layout up for bidding by other firms.

Implementations of the invention involve a division of the characteristics (and
25 especially the costs) of the printing product into two major groups: the commodity aspects and costs; and the informational (or custom) aspects and costs.

The commodity aspects and costs are those that are deliberately forced to be non-varying among all of the print jobs. These include papers, inks and depreciation. Only a relatively small set of different papers may be permitted which reduces the cost
30 of the paper to a bare minimum. Only standard process inks may be permitted, which similarly reduces ink costs to a bare minimum. Finally, printing equipment costs (including depreciation expense) are also in the nature of a commodity across the many jobs that are to be printed. The goal is to reduce these costs to the bare minimum that

would be achieved were the presses to be run at full capacity and with zero setup time. The costs are driven toward this result by using techniques that reduce the setup time to a bare minimum and give the printer equipment owners a medium for easily filling essentially all of their unused capacity.

- 5 On the informational (custom) side are such aspects as definition of content of each print job, price, delivery, and other terms, the ability to reduce capacity underutilization, color definition and verification, variations in quantity, the details of delivery and invoicing, the details of change over and setup, and marketing and sales efforts. On this informational side, too, the goal of the implementations is to drive the
- 10 costs down (in theory to near zero) using information technology, electronic communication, and other techniques.

- Other embodiments are within the scope of the claims. For example, while fixed and variable fields are discussed above in the context of customer-defined
- 15 templates, in some implementations the web server host may provide templates having this feature as part of the website studio.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method comprising
accumulating discrete print jobs electronically from respective customers,
aggregating the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the
5 aggregate print jobs being printable at one time on units of an integral print medium,
and
electronically distributing the aggregate print jobs to respective printers for
printing.
2. The method of claim 1 in which the integral print medium comprises cut
10 sheets of paper.
3. The method of claim 1 in which the integral print medium comprises
large rolls of paper designed for use on offset printing web presses.
4. The method of claim 1 in which the print jobs are accumulated through
web browsers.
- 15 5. The method of claim 1 in which the printing of the aggregate print jobs
is done during periods of otherwise unused capacity.
6. The method of claim 1 in which each of the discrete print jobs comprises
a run of fewer than 5,000 copies.
7. The method of claim 1 in which the printing is done on large-scale offset
20 full-color presses.
8. The method of claim 1 in which the aggregating is done automatically.

9. A method comprising
defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying
positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to
be printed,
5 the print jobs being arranged on the grid so that at least at some different
positions along each of the two dimensions of the grid are print jobs that have different
content to be printed on the substrate,
printing the print jobs on the substrate at their respective positions defined by
the grid,
10 cutting the substrate to separate the print jobs, and
distributing at least some of the separated print jobs to different customer
locations.

10. The method of claim 9 in which the print jobs are of different formats.
11. The method of claim 9 in which all of the print jobs are printed on the
15 substrate at one time.

12. A method comprising
defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying
positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to cut sheets of a
substrate to be printed,
20 printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined
by the grid, and
cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate
the print jobs into rectangular stacks.

13. The method of claim 12 wherein each stack defines a separate print job.

25

14. A method comprising
defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a non-preprinted substrate to be printed,
5 printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and
cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs.
15. A method comprising
10 defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to be printed,
printing the print jobs in full color on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and
15 cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs.
16. A method comprising
receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, each of the orders being received at an associated ordering time, each of the orders having an associated
20 delivery time, the periods between the ordering times and the delivery times of at least some of the print jobs being different,
aggregating a set of the print jobs that have essentially the same associated delivery time into an aggregate print job to be printed at one time on shared substrate units, and
25 arranging for the production of the aggregate print job at a time that is just ahead of the delivery time.
17. The method of claim 16 also including
adjusting the prices of the discrete print jobs based on the period between the ordering time and the delivery time.

18. The method of claim 16 also including
arranging for the production during periods of unused printing capacity.

19. A method comprising
offering the printing of discrete print jobs to customers in at least two different
5 service levels,
one of the service levels comprising printing the print jobs free for the
customers, another of the service levels comprising charging for the print jobs receiving
orders from customers for print jobs at selected service levels, and

aggregating a set of the print jobs for printing at one time on shared substrate
10 units.

20. The method of claim 19 in which the service levels are associated with
speed of turnaround.

21. The method of claim 19 in which the service levels are associated with
presence or absence of third-party advertising on the print job.

22. A method comprising
15 receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers,
electronically creating and accumulating non-commodity information associated
with each of the print jobs,
aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one
20 time on shared substrate units, and
arranging for the production of the aggregate print job using commodity
supplies and services including non-preprinted paper as the common substrate, and
commodity inks.

23. The method of claim 22 in which the arranging for production includes
25 locating printers having unused capacity suitable for the aggregate print job.

24. A method comprising
receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers,
automating the generation of non-commodity information associated with the
print jobs,

5 aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one
time on shared substrate units, and
arranging for production of the aggregate print job in accordance with the non-
commodity information.

25. The method of claim 24 in which the non-commodity information
10 includes at least one of content, approval service, price, delivery terms, color
verification services, quantity, and set up steps.

26. A method comprising
receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers,
defining an aggregate print job comprising a set of the discrete print jobs for
15 printing at one time on shared substrate units, the aggregate print job having a delivery
time,
enabling printers having equipment not economically suitable for completing
individual ones of the discrete print jobs to bid competitively for the aggregate print job
up to a time just ahead of the delivery time, and
20 awarding the aggregate print job to one of the printers prior to the delivery time.

27. The method of claim 26 in which the enabling and awarding are done
electronically.

28. A method comprising
receiving information defining discrete print jobs each of which is alone
economically unfeasible for printing on high volume printing equipment,
aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the
5 aggregate printing jobs being configured for printing at one time on units of a common
substrate, the aggregate print jobs being economically feasible for printing on high
volume printing equipment,
each of the aggregate printing jobs having a defined delivery time,
making the aggregate print jobs available up to just before the delivery time, for
10 competitive bidding by printers having the high volume printing equipment, and
awarding each of the aggregate print jobs to the printer with the most
competitive bid based on predetermined criteria.

29. A method comprising
using a high volume printing machine to produce high volume print jobs, each
15 of the high volume print jobs comprising printing of only a large number of identical
images one after the other,
determining the availability, between high volumes print jobs, of unused
printing capacity,
bidding for aggregate print jobs that can be produced economically on the high
20 volume printing machine using the unused printing capacity, each of the aggregate print
jobs comprising an aggregation of discrete print jobs that would be economically
unfeasible to print separately using the printing machine, and
printing at least one of the aggregate print jobs.

30. A method comprising
25 performing graphic design of a discrete print job on a design application that
runs on a web browser,
transferring the print job to a web server for storage after the graphic design is
performed,
modifying the print job on the web browser, and
30 updating the print job on the web server after the modifying is done.

31. A method comprising
aggregating discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs to be produced on units
of a common substrate, all of the aggregate print jobs conforming to a standard format,
transmitting the aggregate print jobs to a printer electronically, and
5 at the printer, configuring printing equipment for producing different ones of the
aggregate print jobs using the same steps.

32. A method comprising
defining a standard template format for containing common graphical
information that relates to different discrete print jobs,
10 providing a design tool to enable a designer to create a template that complies
with the standard template format and embodies the common graphical information,
enabling the designer to deliver the template to a server electronically,
enabling users at client machines to use the template to generate different
discrete print jobs that conform to the template and include custom graphical
15 information specific to each of the discrete print jobs, and
aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs for printing
at one time on units of shared substrate.

33. A method comprising
aggregating discrete high-quality full color print jobs into a single aggregate
20 print job,
printing the single aggregate print job using standard process colors and
standard un-pre-printed paper on high speed printing equipment, and
distributing the aggregate print jobs in electronic files.

34. A method comprising
digitally aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job to be printed
at one time on units of a standard shared substrate, the aggregate print job being defined
in a standard compressed prepress data format,
5 sending the aggregate print job to a workstation at a printing site,
at the printing site, Raster Image Processing the aggregate print job to create
standard color separations,
using a computer-to-plate process to create plates based on the color
separations,
10 loading the plates onto a high volume press in accordance with a standard
predefined protocol,
loading units of the standard shared substrate onto the press,
printing the aggregate print job onto the standard shared substrate,
cutting apart the standard shared substrate units to separate the discrete print
15 jobs, and
forwarding the discrete print jobs to different customer destinations.

35. A method comprising
aggregating discrete print jobs into a digital aggregate print job to be printed at
one time on units of a standard shared substrate, the placement of the discrete printing
20 jobs within the aggregate print job being defined by a digital aggregation template that
represents the locations of cuts that will be needed to separate the discrete print jobs
from the aggregate print job,
placing a physical embodiment of the aggregation template on the units of the
standard shared substrate, and
25 using the physical embodiment of the aggregation template as a guide to making
cuts to separate the discrete print jobs.

36. The method of claim 35 in which the aggregate print job includes a
plurality of aggregated sheets, and is identified by an identifier printed on each
aggregated sheet within the aggregate print job.

37. The method of claim 35 wherein information printed on the aggregation template is used to automatically identify each discrete print job.

38. A method comprising
aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job,
5 printing the aggregate print job at a printing site,
separating the discrete print jobs by cutting apart the aggregate print jobs,
electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using
a print job identifier,
at the printing site placing the print jobs into shipment bins of a parcel carrier
10 that tracks shipments electronically using a shipment identifier,
associating the print job identifier with the parcel carrier's shipment identifier,
enabling customers of the discrete print jobs to track the progress of delivery of
their discrete print jobs electronically.

39. A method comprising
15 aggregating discrete print jobs of respective customers into an aggregate print
job,
printing the aggregate print job at a printing site,
separating the discrete print jobs by cutting apart the aggregate print jobs,
electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using
20 a print job identifier,
shipping the discrete print jobs essentially as soon as they are printed, cut and
packaged,
electronically billing the customers in response to completion of the printing
and delivery of the discrete print jobs to a shipper for shipment.

25 40. A method comprising
printing an aggregate print job,
cutting the aggregate print job apart to form different discrete print jobs,
automatically printing shipping labels for shipping the different discrete print
jobs to different respective customers, and

applying the labels to the different discrete print jobs in accordance with identifiers on the labels.

41. A method comprising
- providing different kinds of entry ports into a print job execution system, each
- 5 of the entry ports enabling a user to create interactively a full color print job in accordance with a pre-defined design template,
- at each of the ports, generating a digital print job file based on the design template and design input of the user, all of the print job files being expressed in a standard design data format,
- 10 routing all of the digital print job files electronically to an aggregation system, at the aggregation system, assembling selected ones of the digital print job files into aggregate print jobs, all of the aggregate print jobs being expressed in a standard prepress format, and
- routing different ones of the aggregate print jobs electronically to different
- 15 printers for printing.

42. Apparatus comprising
- web browsers configured for interactive design by users of discrete print jobs, a central storage for information about the discrete print jobs that results from interaction with the users,
- 20 a scalable group of web servers that interact with the web browsers and with the central storage,
- a scalable group of printing servers configured to aggregate the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs and deliver the aggregate print jobs electronically to printers.

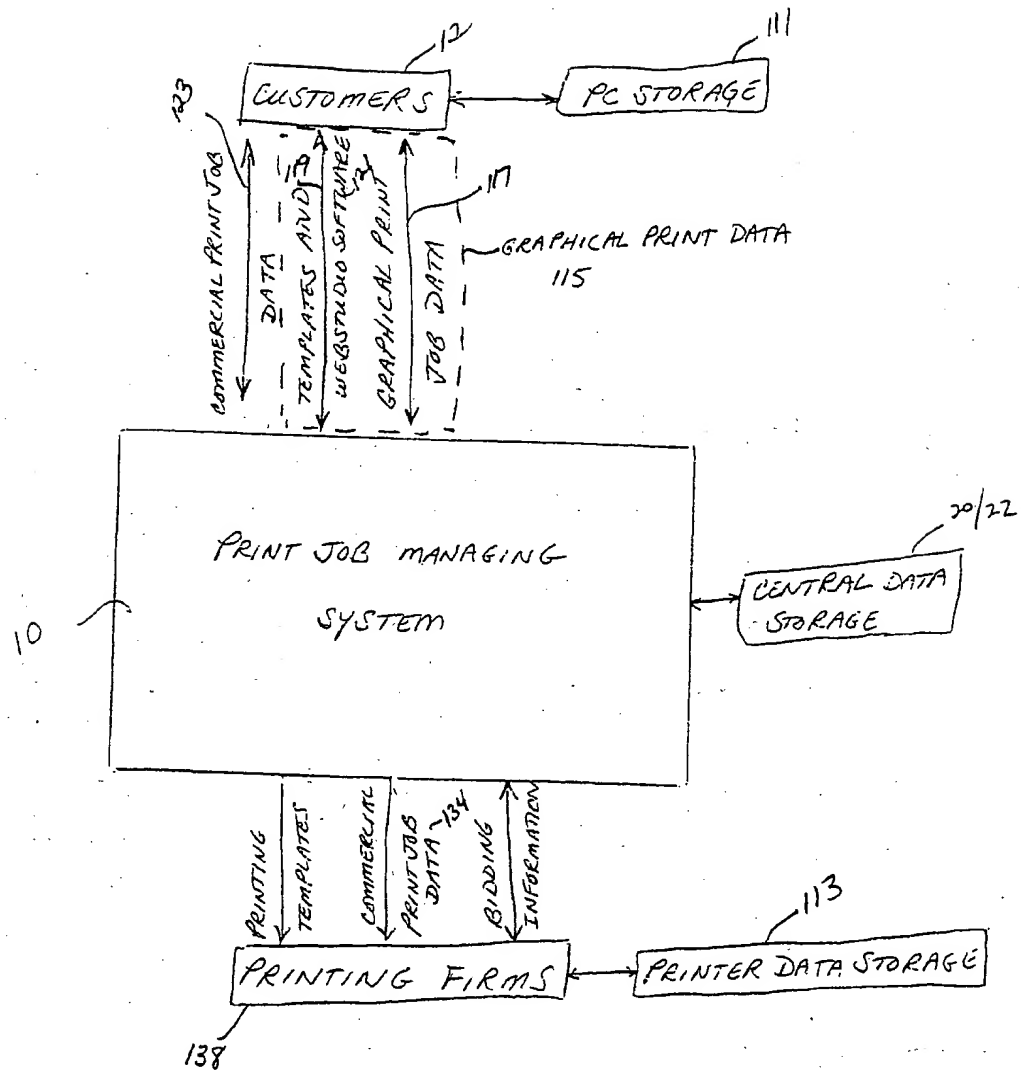
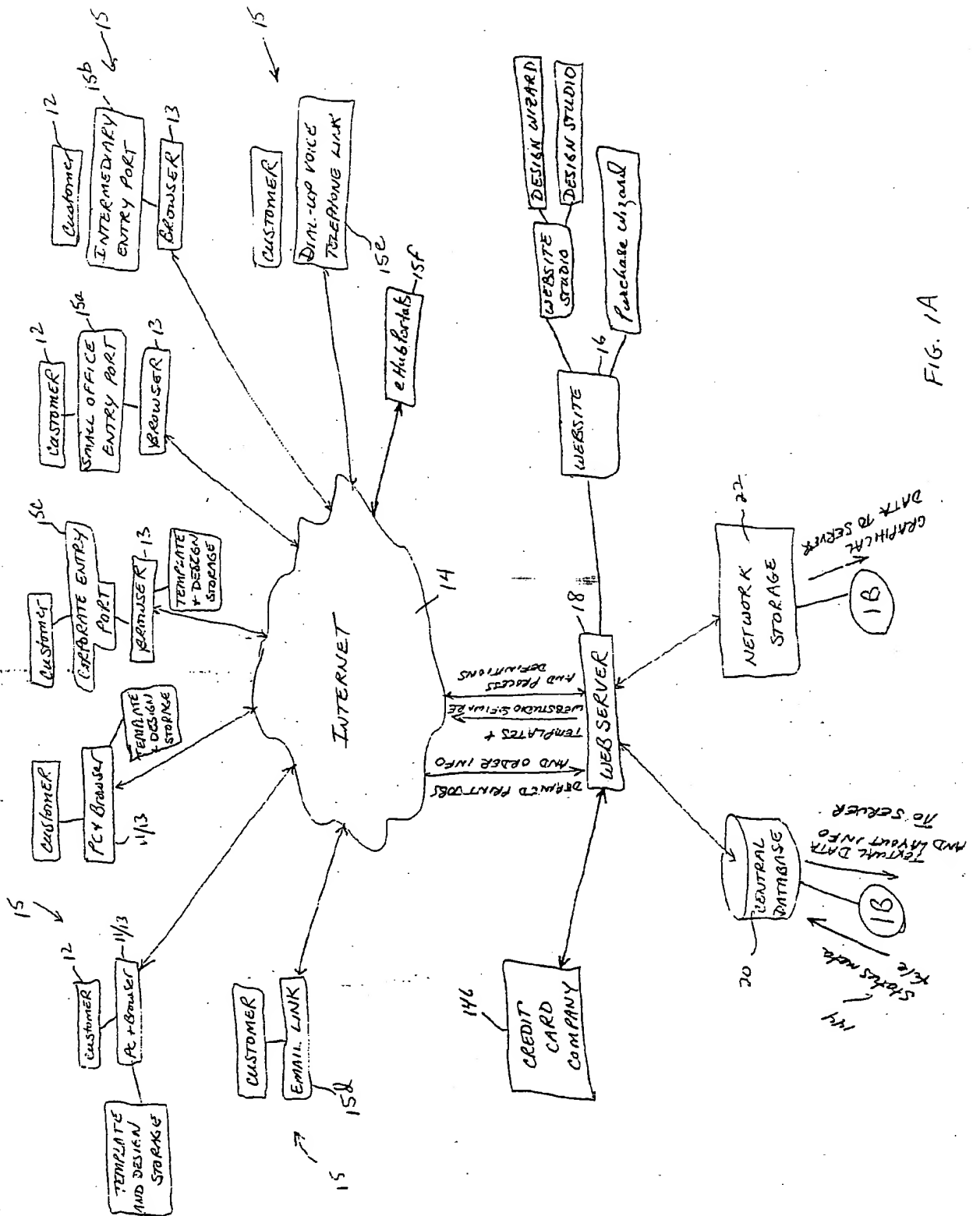


FIG. 1



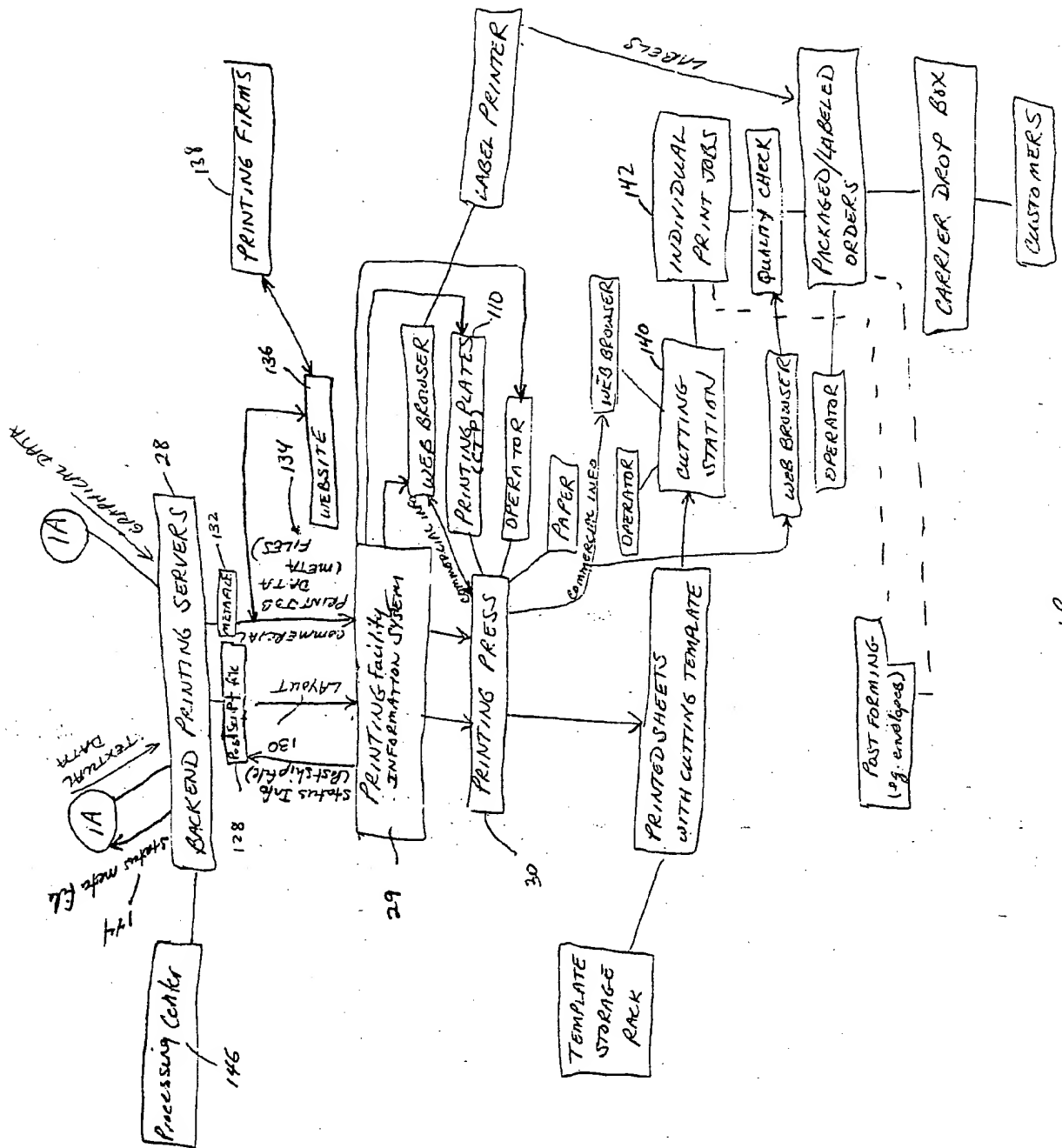


FIG. 1B

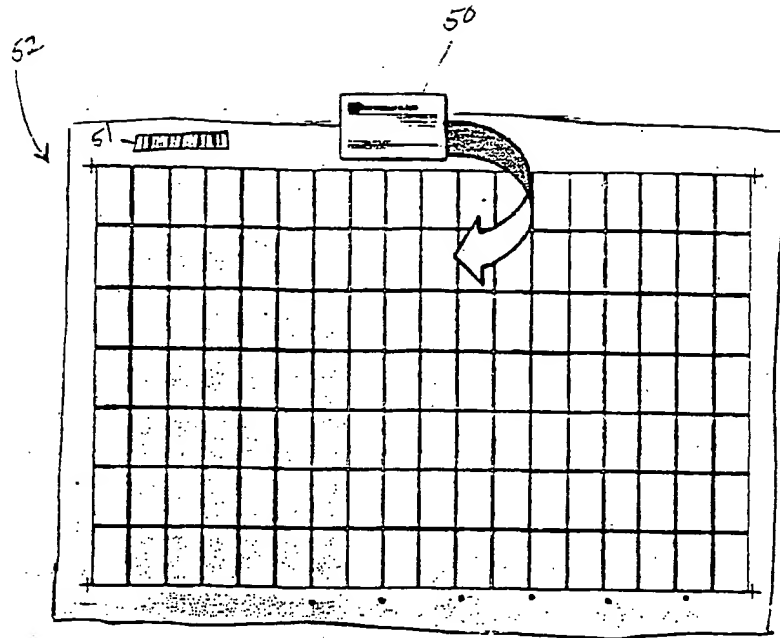


FIG. 2

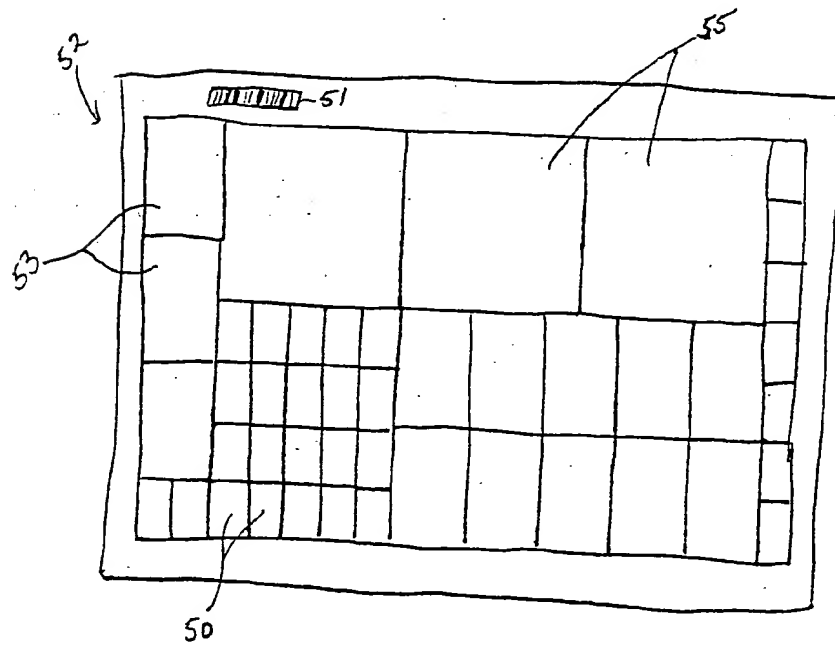


FIG. 2A

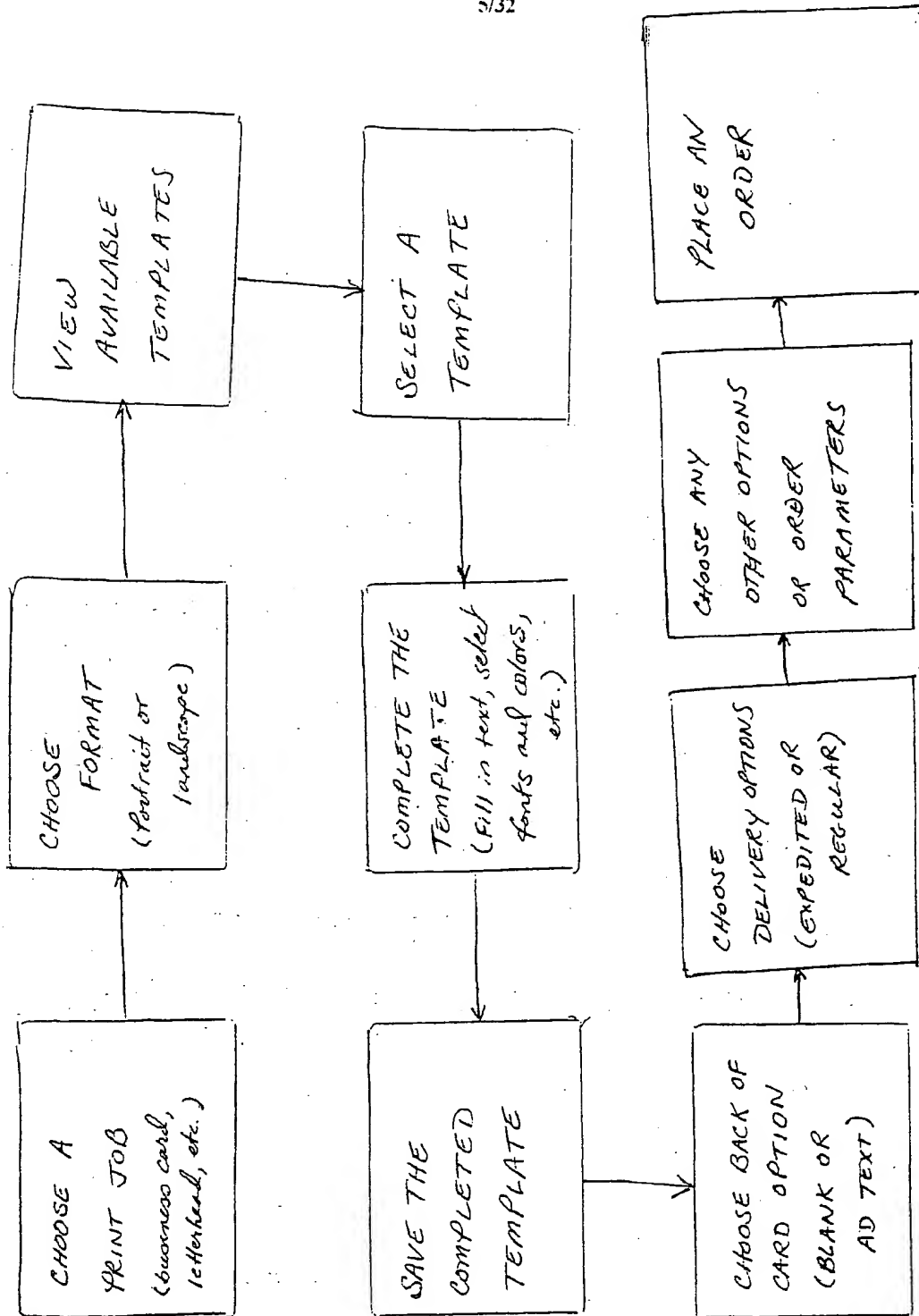


FIG. 3

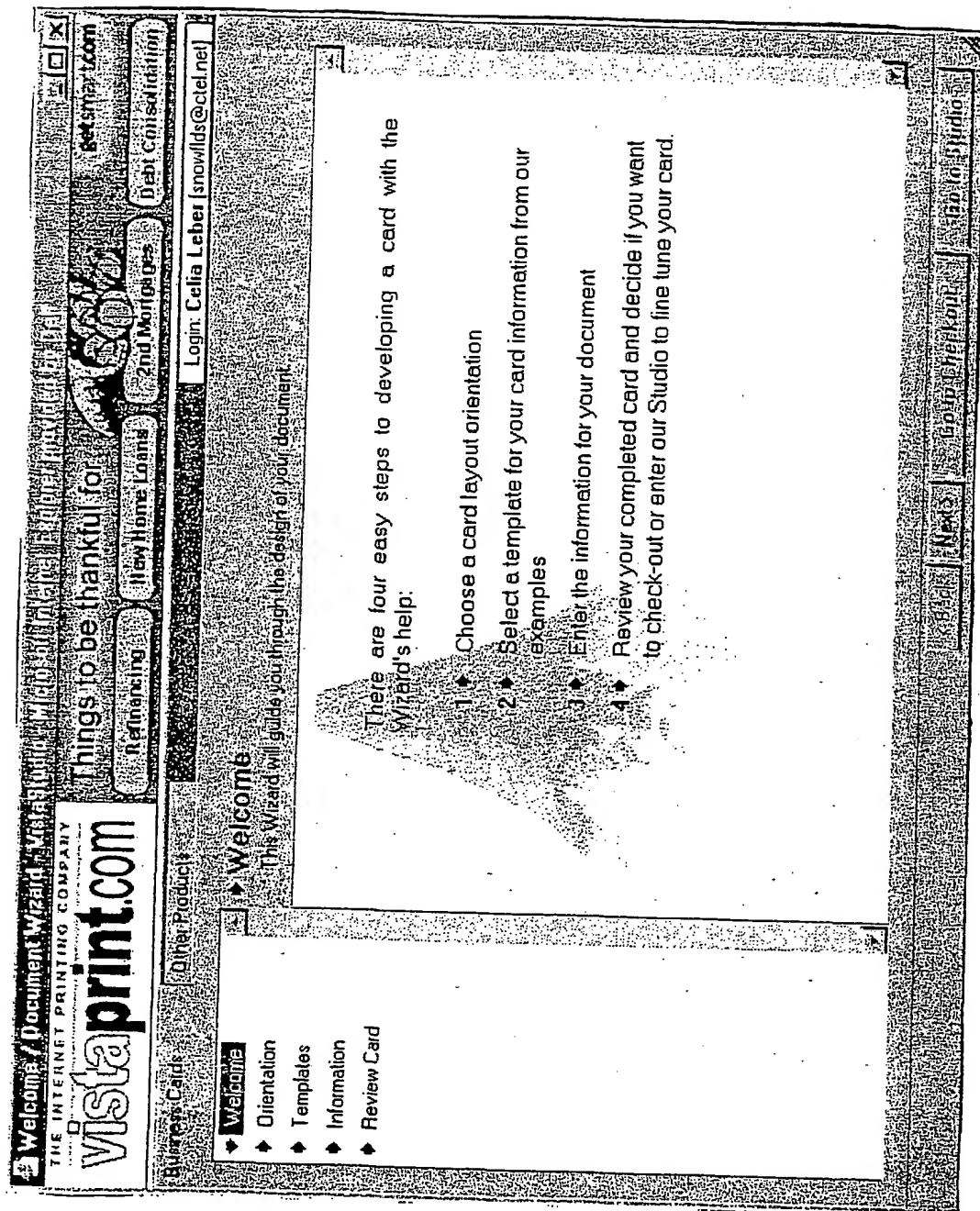


FIG. 4

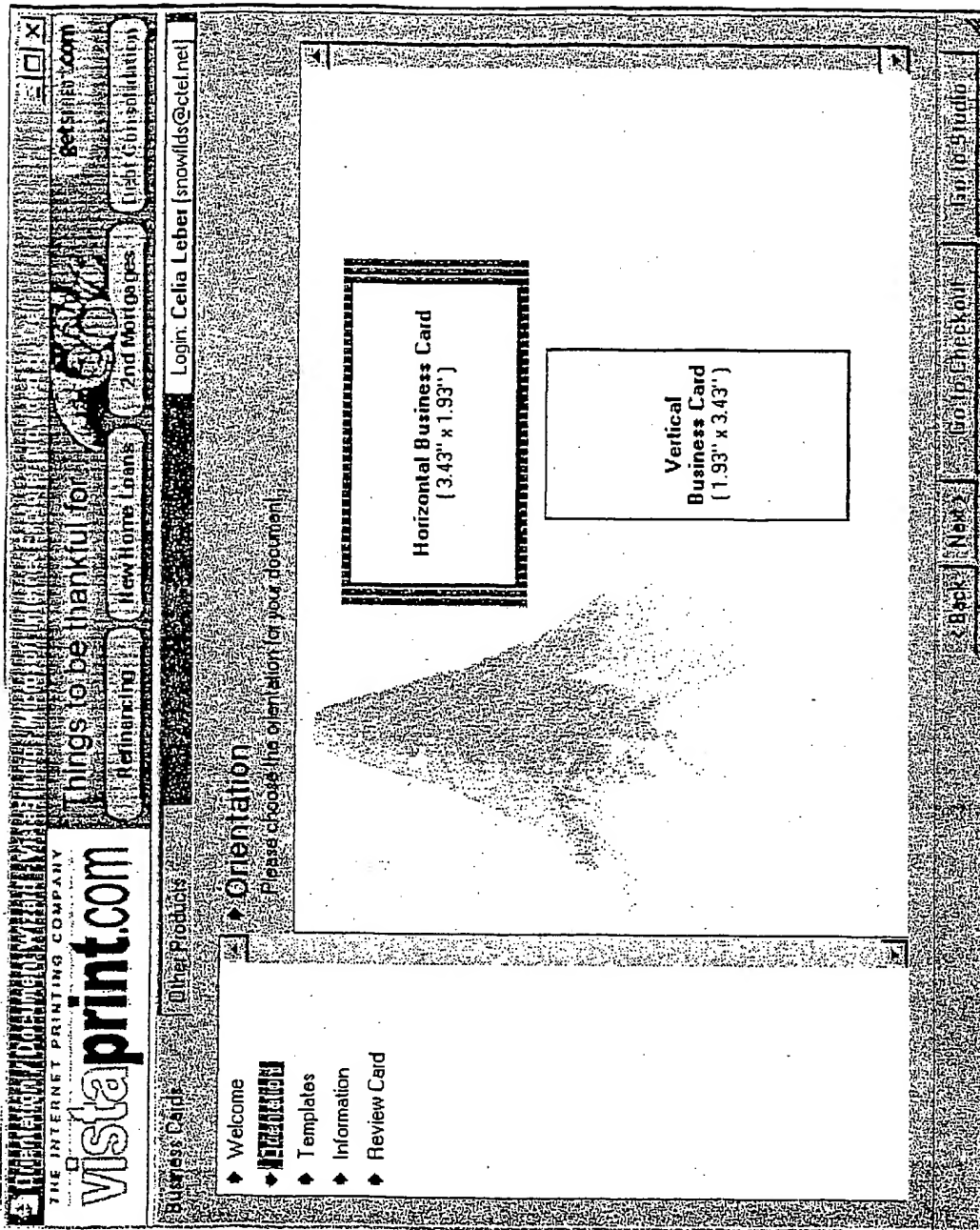


FIG. 4A

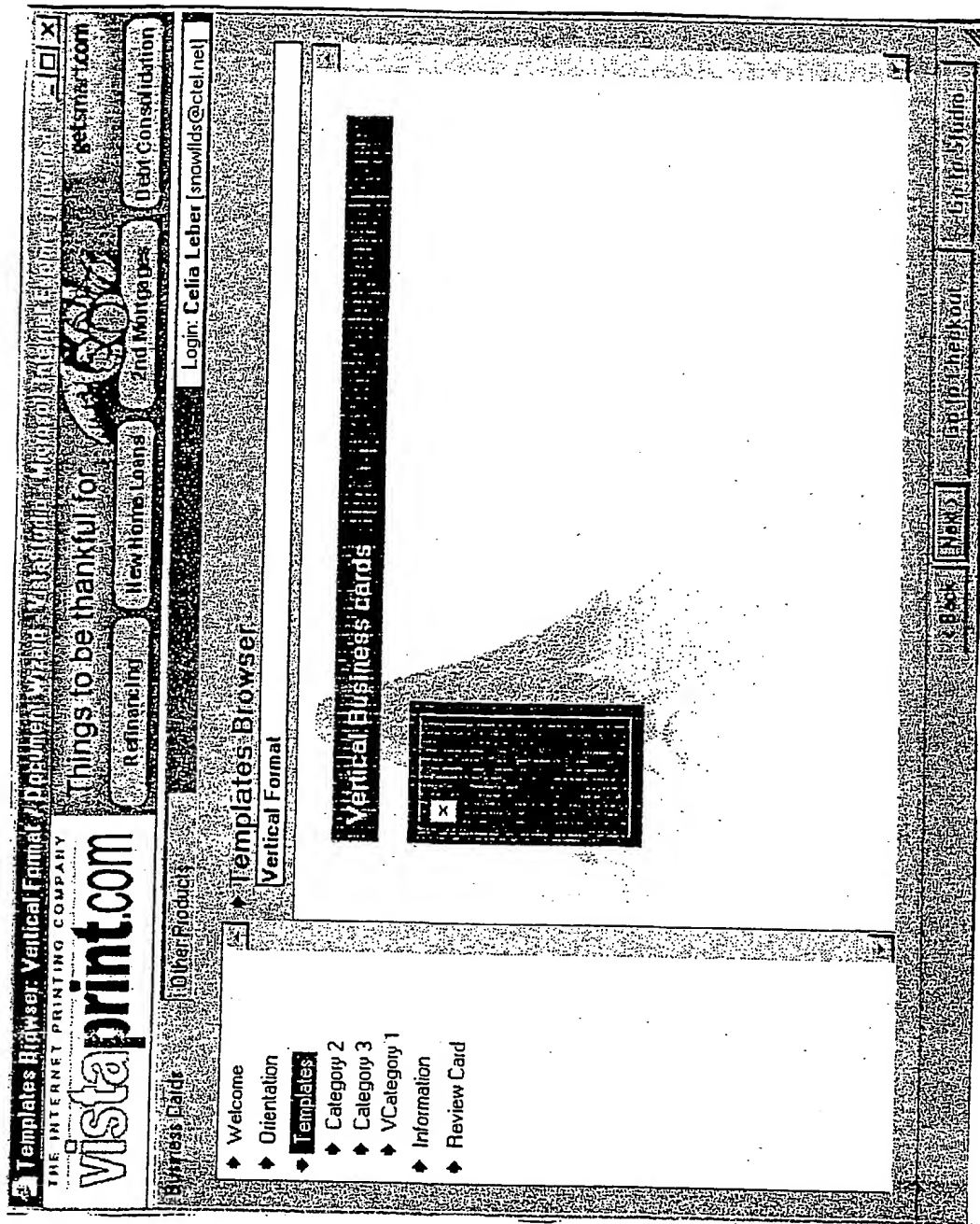


FIG. 4B

F16.4/C

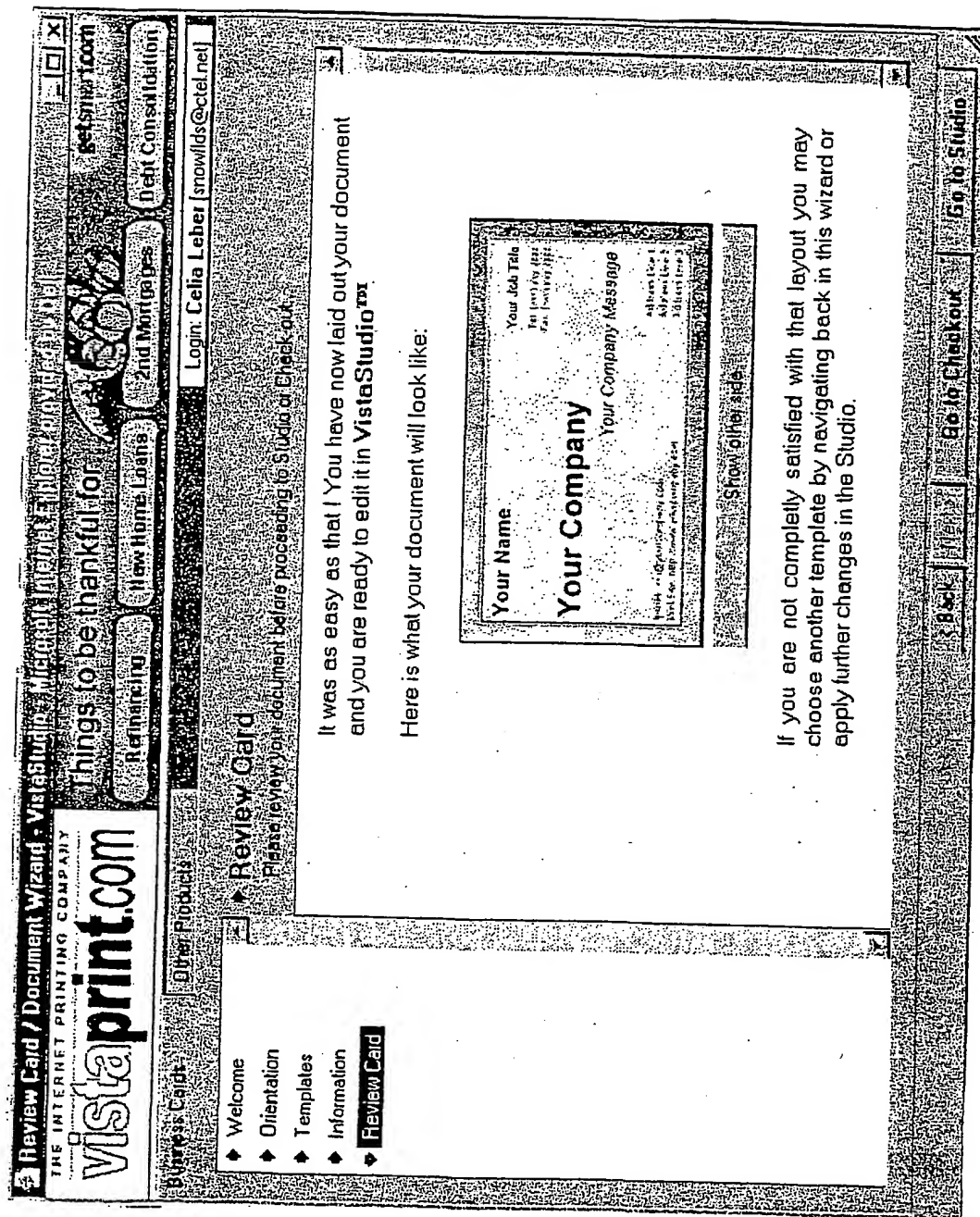


FIG. 4D

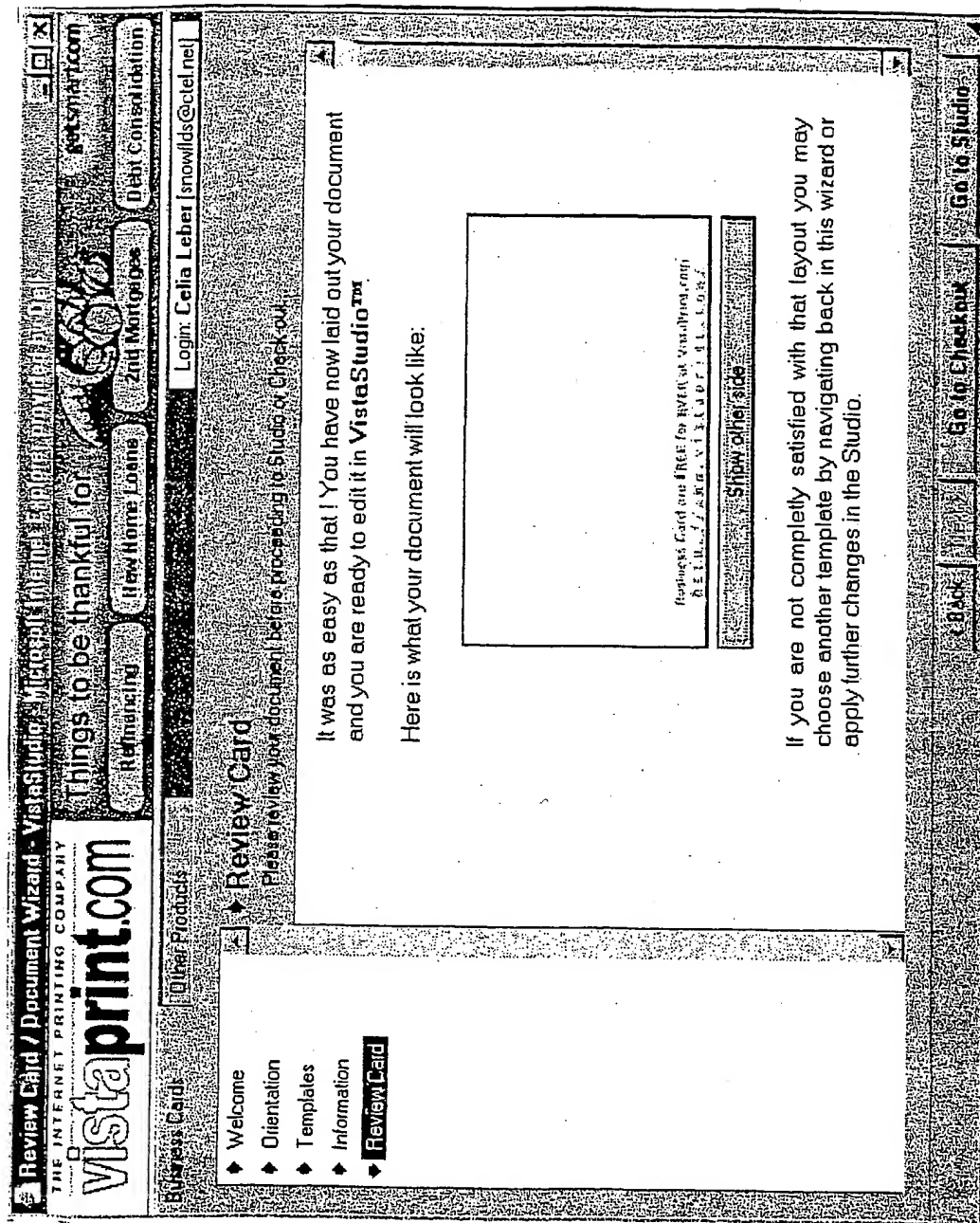


FIG. 4E

Review Card / Document Wizard - VistaStudio® Microsoft® Internet Explorer® powered by Pantone®

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

vistaprint.com

Things to be thankful for

Refinancing New Home Loans 2nd Mortgage Debt

get sm! / com

Debi Consoledition

[4/12] - [19.2kb] - Editor Core Class

Please wait a moment (the first time you use VistaStudio this may take a little longer)

VistaStudio® 3.0

Stella Correll, Chita Marsh, Yvett Gimbale, Erik Robertson, Kelle Bechtel, Gwyn Jones

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 VistaStudio and the VistaStudio logo are trademarks of VistaPrint.com Incorporated.
 PANTONE® and the PANTONE® Matching System are trademarks of Pantone, Inc.

FIG. 4F

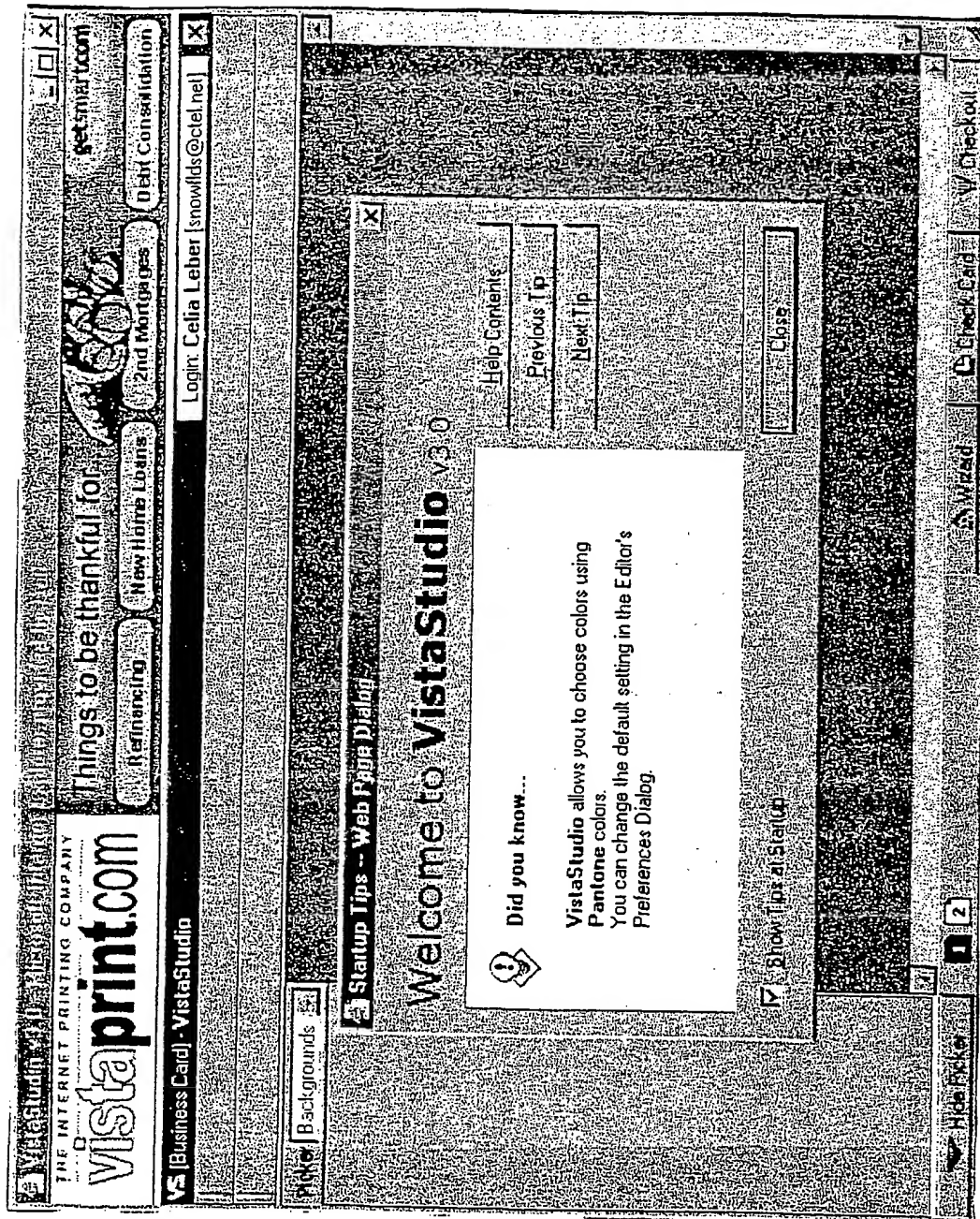


FIG. 4G



FIG. 4H

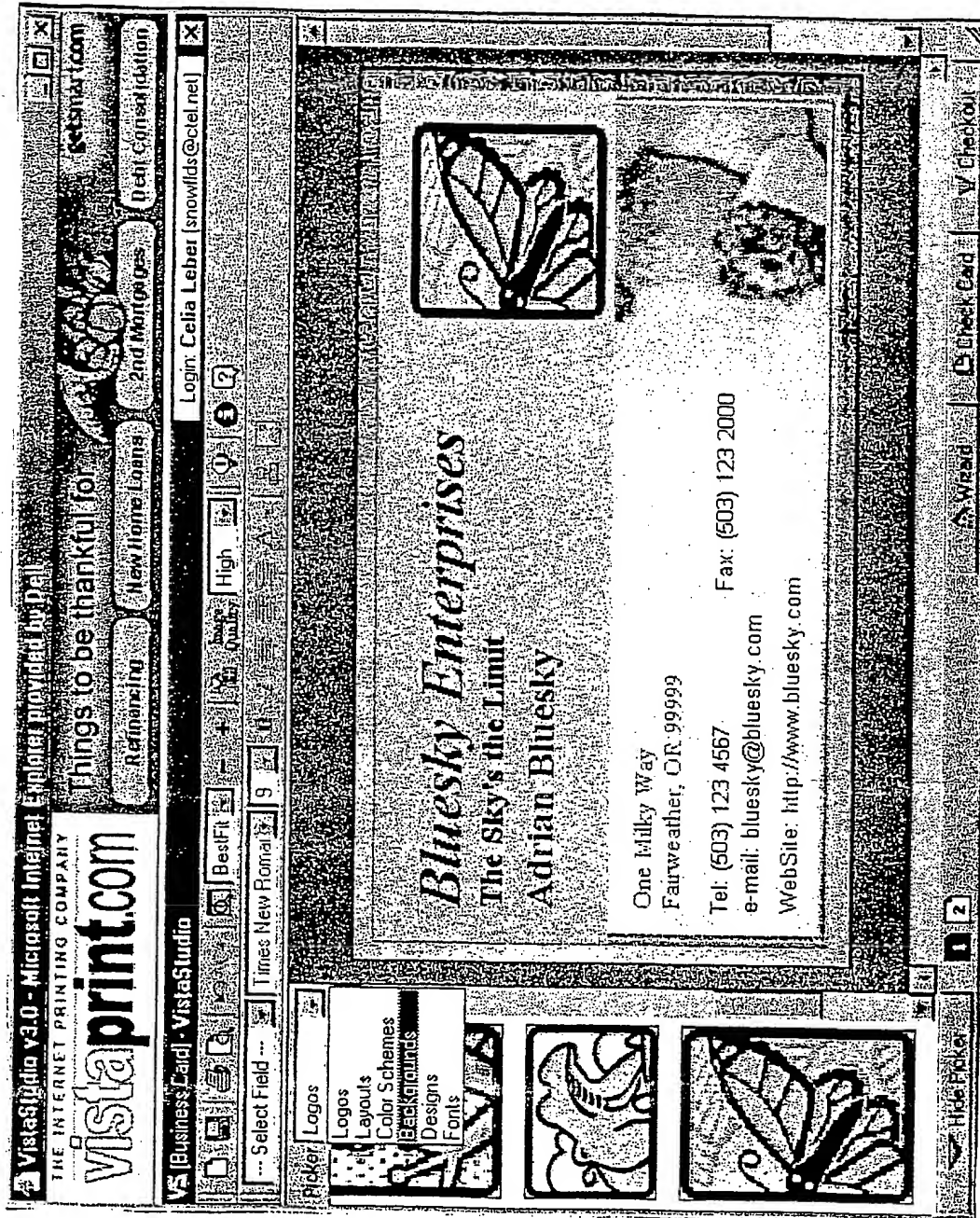


FIG. 4I

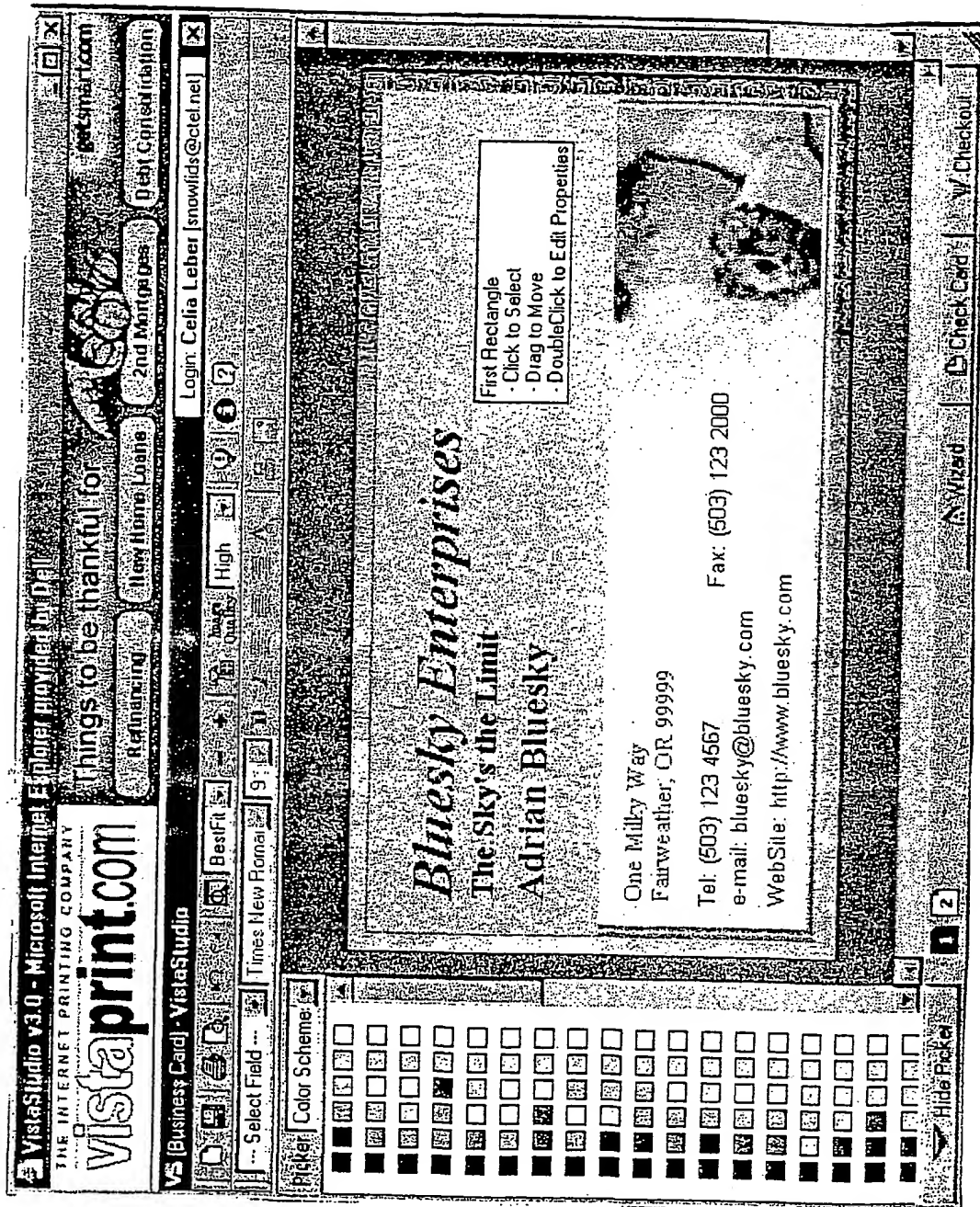


FIG. 4J

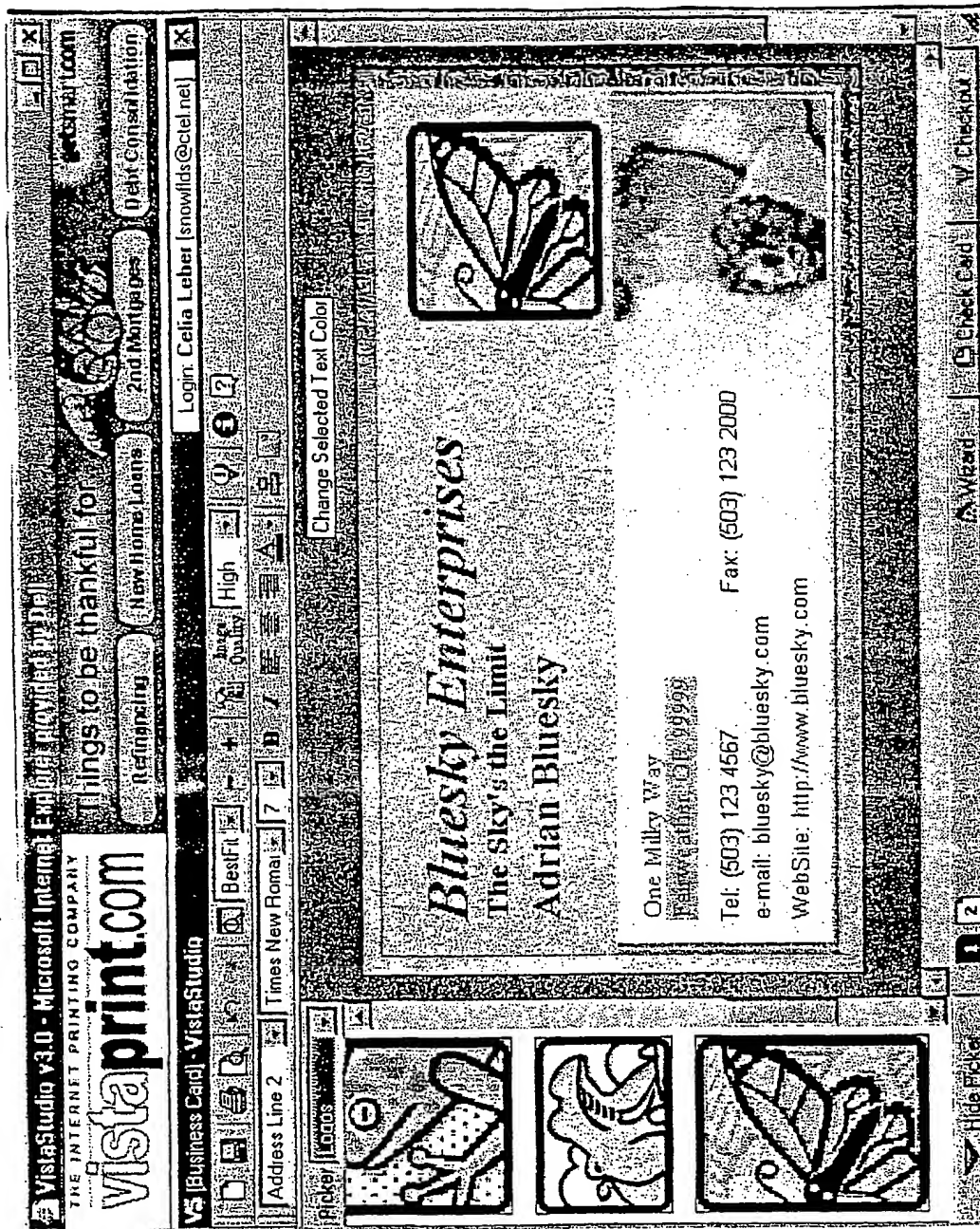


FIG. 4K

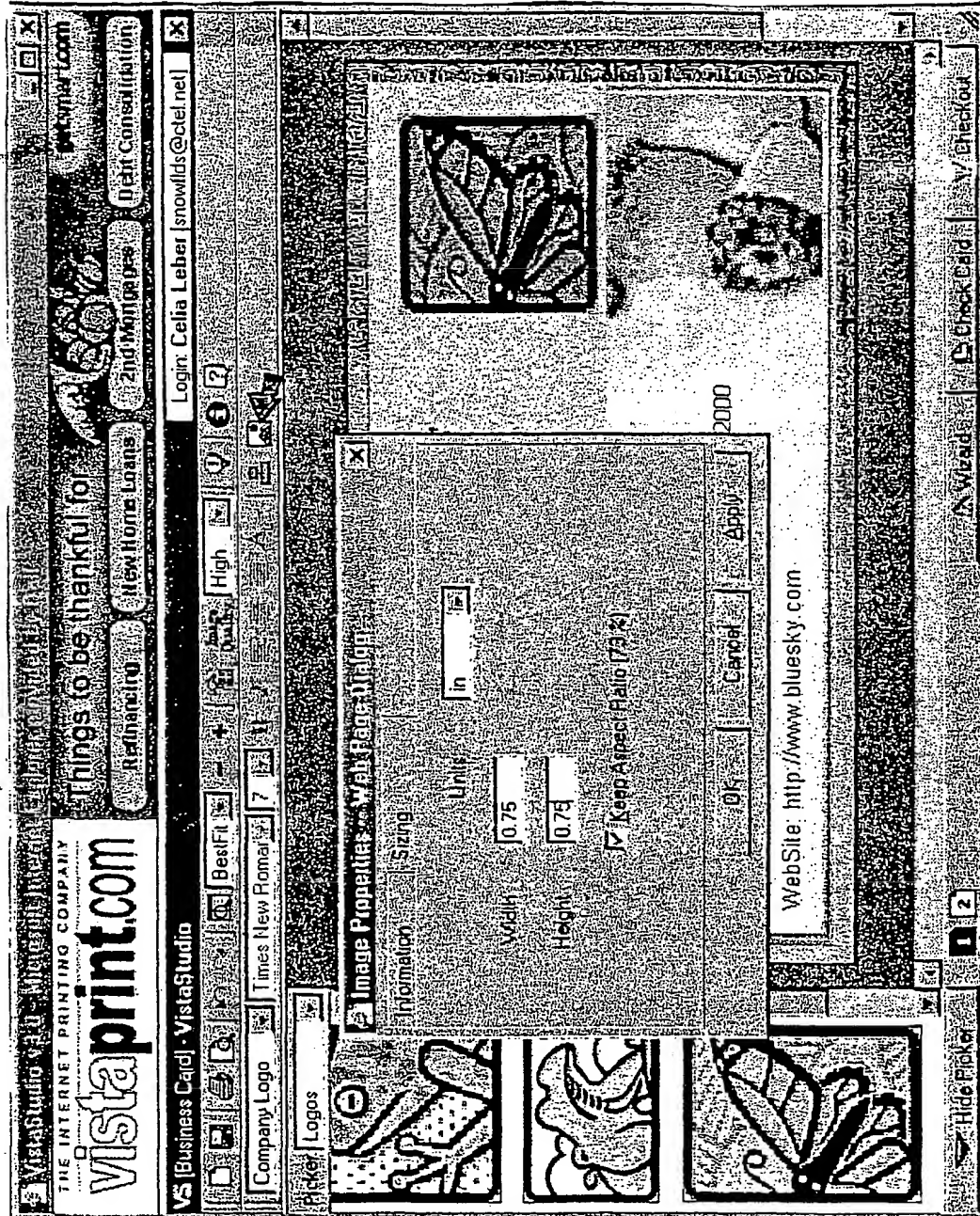


FIG. 4L

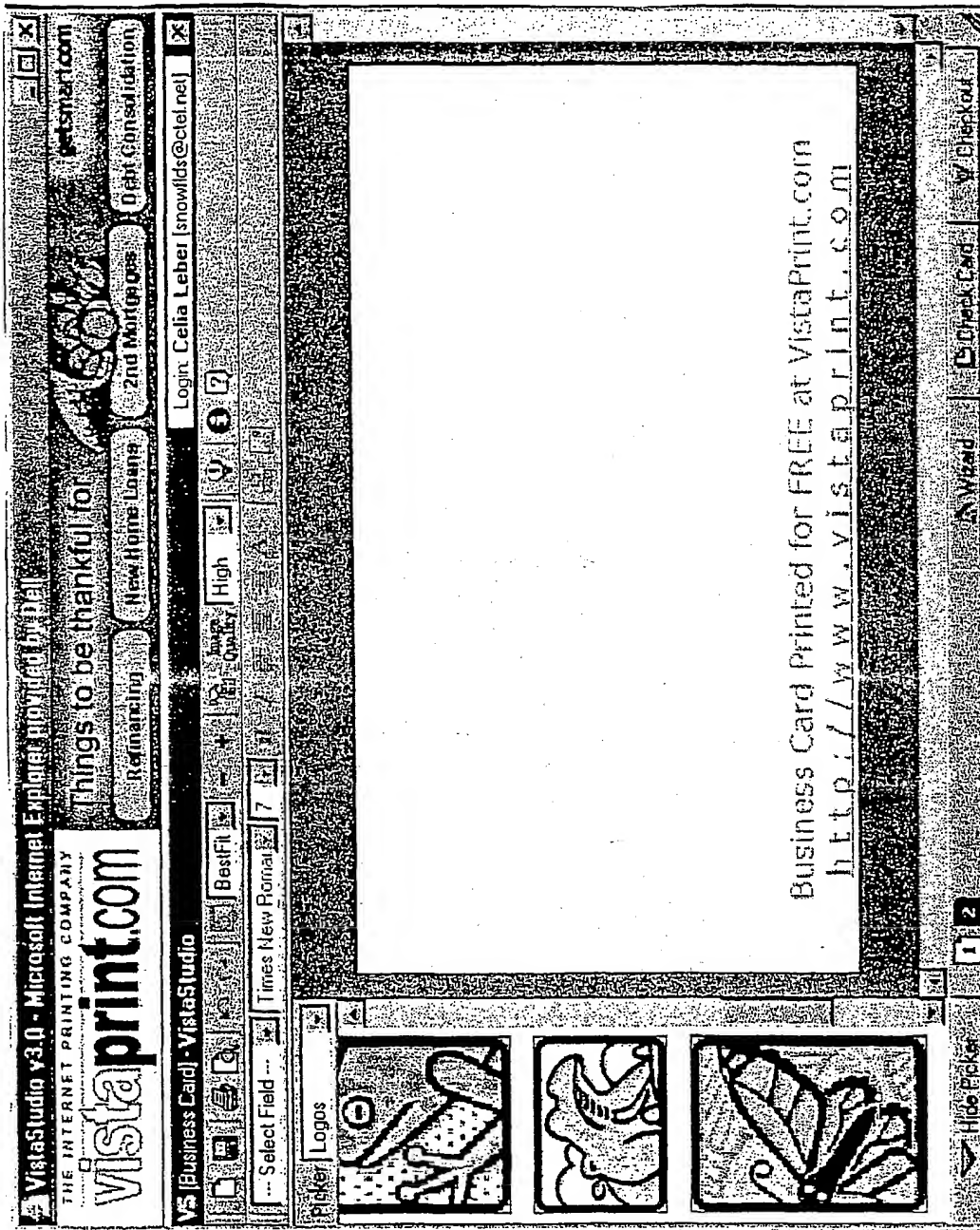


FIG. 4m

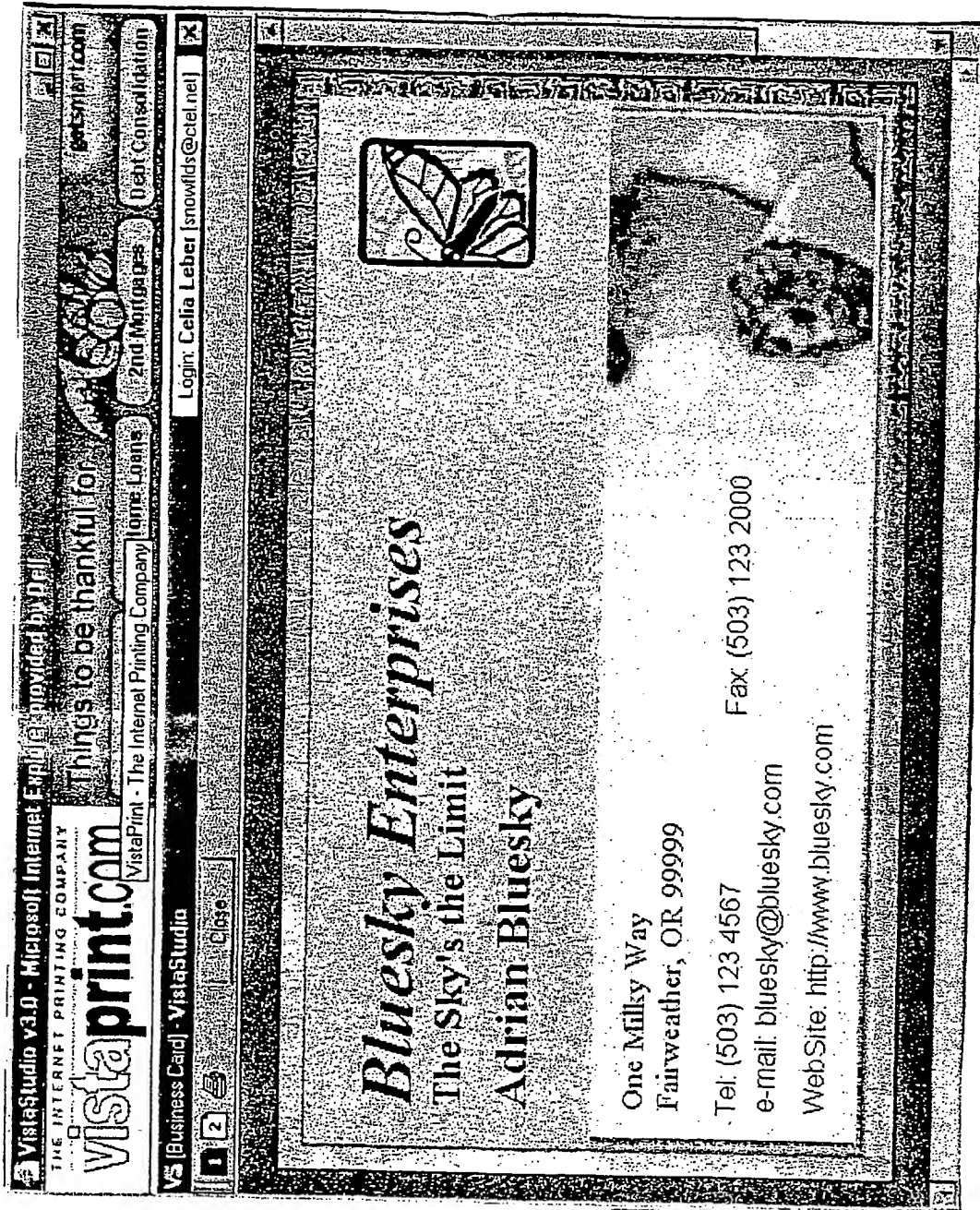


FIG. 4N

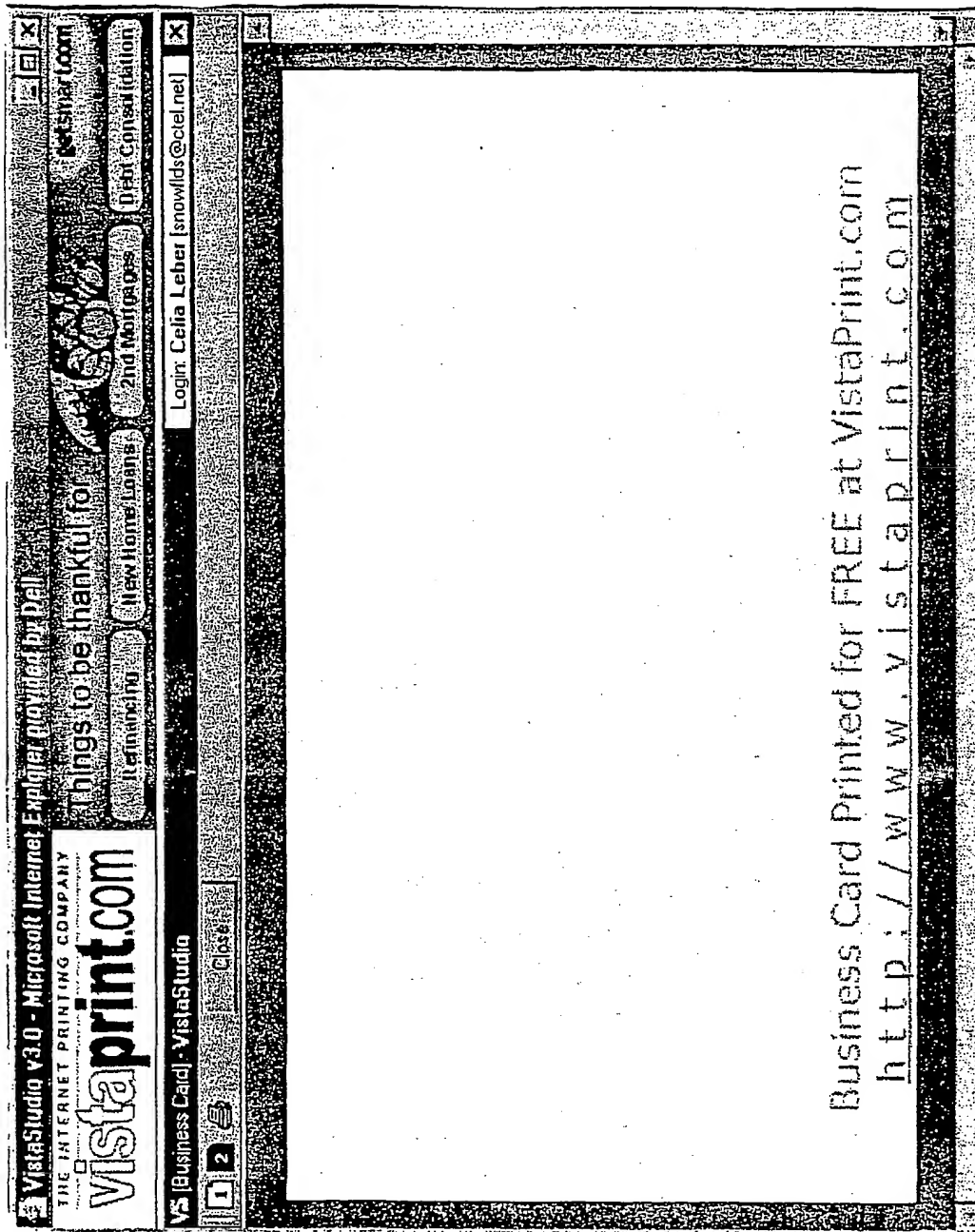


FIG. 40

Welcome / Checkout Wizard - VistaStudio - Microsoft Internet Explorer - VistaPrint.com

vistaprint.com
THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

250 Full-Color Business Cards for FREE

Login: Celia Lebet [snowlids@otel.net]

Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question?

Welcome
This Wizard will guide you through the Purchasing process.

In advance we wish to thank you for your confidence in VistaPrint goods and services. You're currently hooked to a secure server. At VistaPrint.com we do everything so that your shopping experience stays completely secure and satisfying.

Here are the steps this wizard will guide you through:

- ◆ **Review**
Review your order, change quantity, edit item.
- ◆ **Address**
Type in your shipping address.
- ◆ **Options**
Change order options.
- ◆ **Delivery**
Choose delivery options: Printing Priority and Shipping Method.
- ◆ **Billing**
Enter your billing information.
- ◆ **Confirm**
Check you pre-invoice and confirm your order. Your credit card is not charged until you reached and confirmed this step.

Secure Server Connection

Back Next Finish

FIG. 4P

Review / Checkout Wizard - VistaStudio - Microsoft Internet Explorer (Address provided by dial)

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY
vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

250 Full Color Business Cards for FREE

Work 250 Login: Celia Leber [snowlids@ccl.net]

Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question?

Review
Please Review Your Document (If You're not satisfied, you can mark it in the studio)

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | FREE |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | FREE |
| Sub-Total: | | FREE |

Your Name
Your Job Title
Company Name
Address Line 1
Address Line 2
City, State, Zip
Phone Number

Your Company Message
Address Line 1
Address Line 2
City, State, Zip
Phone Number

Business Card size FREE! For order at vistastudio.com
U.S.A. 1-800-833-6666

Print VistaStudio

Secure Server Connection [Back] [Next >]

FIG. 40

Shipping Address / Checkout Wizard VistaStudio: Microfilm Internal Edition (VistaStudio.com)

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

Work 250 Full-Color Business Cards for FREE

Login: Celia Leber (snowfls@ctel.net)

Ordering Information Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question?

Address
Please fill in the following form with your shipping information.

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | FREE |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | FREE |
| Sub Total: | | FREE |

Shipping Address
Please note that ALL fields in this form are required.

First Name: Adrian

Last Name: Bluesky

Street: One Milky Way

City: Fairweather

State (US Only): Oregon ZIP Code: 99999

Country: United States of America Phone: (503) 123-4567

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Secure Server Connection Back Next Finish

FIG. 4R

Options: Blank Reverse / Checkout Wizard VistaPrint.com
THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

Want: 250 Full-Color Business Cards for: FREE

Login: Celia Leber (snowlids@ctel.net)

Options: Blank Reverse Side
As part of this product order, VistaPrint.com proposes you the specific option. See below for details.

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | FREE |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | FREE |
| Sub Total: | | FREE |

For promotional purposes, VistaPrint.com is advertising on the back of every business card we print "Free Business Cards at <http://www.vistaprint.com>"
So, on, so on...
Option costs: \$ 8.00

☐ Please print my Business Cards with a blank reverse side.

Secure Server Connection

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FIG. 45

44. 43

Submitting Basket to Server / Checkout Wizard Via **Surfing** / **Microsoft** / **Internet Explorer** / **Dr.**

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

Work 250 Full-Color Business Cards (or) FREE

Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber (snowlds@tel.net)

Submitting Basket to Server
Next Step requires server computation. We are currently submitting your basket to the server for this. Please hold on...

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | FREE |
| Full-Bleed Document Pijining | 1 | FREE |
| S u b T o t a l : | | FREE |

We are currently submitting your basket to the server, please hold on...

Secure Server Connection

Back Next Finish

FIG. 4U

Delivery / Checkout Wizard - VistaPrint.com - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell
 Billing Information & Address / Checkout Wizard - VistaPrint.com - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY
VistaPrint.com

Welcome Dayview Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

Order Information: Shipping Notes & Policies / Have a question?

Billing Information & Address
 Please fill in the following form with your billing information.

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|--------------------------------|-----|----------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | FREE |
| Full-Blood Document Printing | 1 | FREE |
| Subtotal | | \$ 3.60 |
| Shipping & Handling | | \$ |
| Total | | \$ 3.60 |

Login: Cefo Lebe [xmuwls@del.net]

Billing Information
 Please note that ALL fields in this form are required.

Name on Credit Card: Adrian Bluesky

Credit Card Number:

Expiration Date: Mar 2000

Type: VISA

You will not be charged until final approval on next page

Billing Address
 Please note that ALL fields in this form are required.

First Name: Adrian

Last Name: Bluesky

Street: One Milky Way

City: Fairweather

State (US Only): Oregon

Country: United States of America

ZIP Code: 99999

Phone: (509) 123-4567

Secure Server Connection

Back Next

FIG. 4W

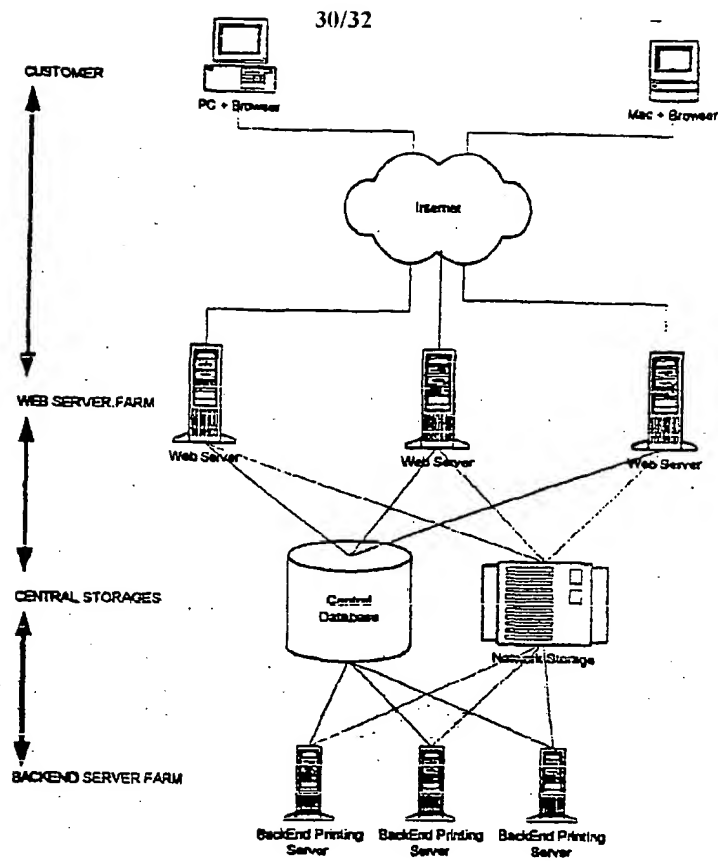


FIG. 7

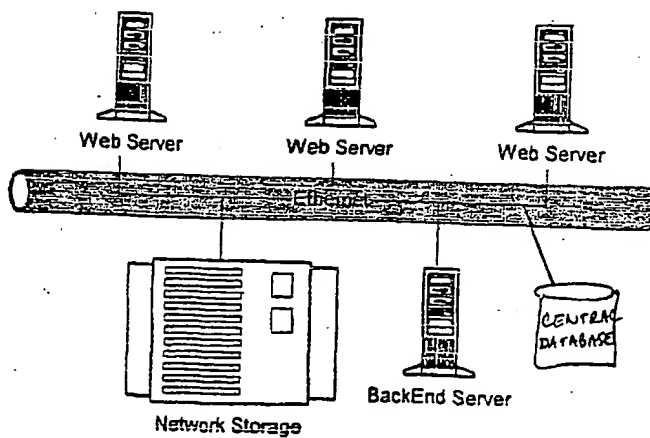


FIG. 5

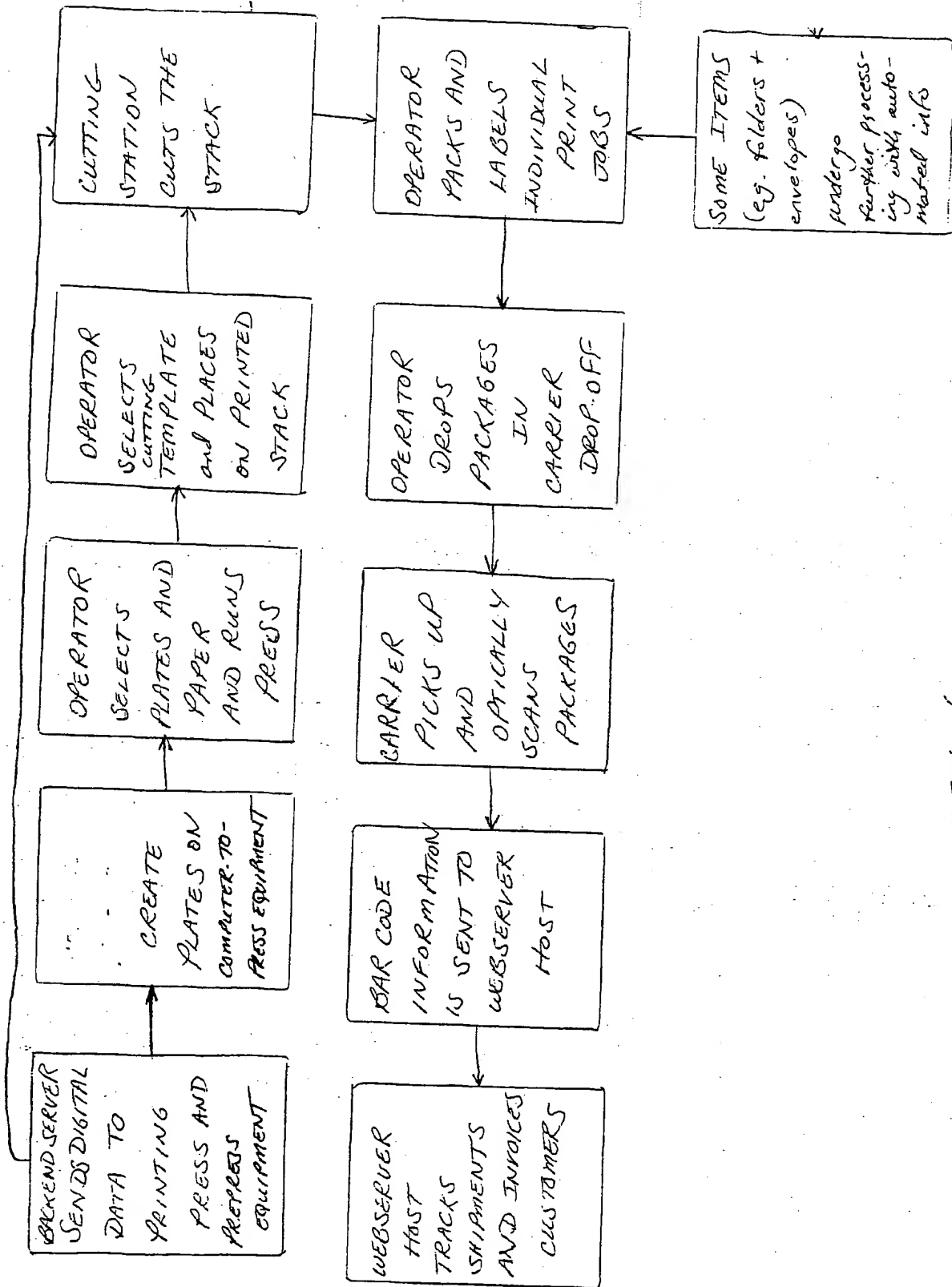


FIG. 6

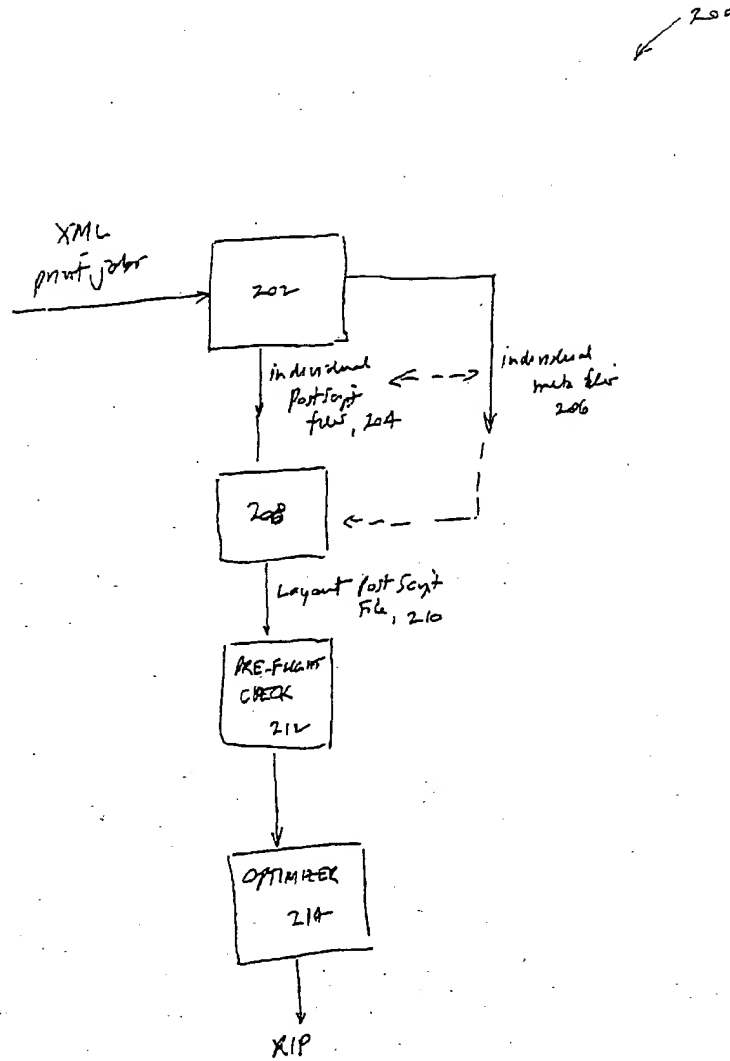
Queue Processing

FIG. 8

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US01/02165

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 15/00

US CL : 358/1.15

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 358/1.1, 1.5, 1.6, 1.9, 1.11, 1.12, 1.15, 400, 500

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

| Category* | Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages | Relevant to claim No. |
|-----------|--|-----------------------|
| X | US 5,287,194 A (LOBIONDO) 15 February 1994, whole document. | 1,5,6,8 |
| Y | | 2-4,7 |
| Y | US 5,974,234 A (LEVINE et al.) 26 October 1999, whole document. | 1-8 |
| Y,P | US 6,145,031 A (MASTIE et al.) 07 November 2000, whole document. | 1-8 |
| Y | US 5,918,988 A (OLJEN) 06 July 1999, whole document. | 1-8 |

☒ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.
 ☐ See patent family annex.

| | |
|---|--|
| Special categories of cited documents: | |
| *A* document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance | *T* later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention |
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| *P* document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed | |

Date of the actual completion of the international search

20 MARCH 2001

Date of mailing of the international search report

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Name and mailing address of the ISA/US
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Box PCT
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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US01/02165

C (Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

| Category* | Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages | Relevant to claim No. |
|-----------|--|-----------------------|
| Y | US 5,984,446 A (SILVERBROOK) 16 November 1999, whole document. | 2,3 and 7 |
| A | US 4,932,320 A (BRUNETTI et al.) 12 June 1990, see figures 1-5. | 1-8 |
| A | US 4,852,485 A (BRUNNER) 01 August 1989, see figures 2-7. | 1-8 |

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US01/02165

Box I Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of item 1 of first sheet)

This international report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:

2. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they relate to parts of the international application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful international search can be carried out, specifically:

3. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box II Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of item 2 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:

Please See Extra Sheet.

1. ☐ As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers all searchable claims.
2. ☐ As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying an additional fee, this Authority did not invite payment of any additional fee.
3. ☐ As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:
4. ☒ No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this international search report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:
1-8

Remark on Protest

- ☐ The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest.
☐ No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US01/02165

BOX II. OBSERVATIONS WHERE UNITY OF INVENTION WAS LACKING

This ISA found multiple inventions as follows:

This application contains the following inventions or groups of inventions which are not so linked as to form a single inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1. In order for all inventions to be searched, the appropriate additional search fees must be paid.

- | | | |
|-------|---|--|
| I. | Claims 1-8, drawn to method of printing print jobs on units of an integral print medium and distributing print jobs to different printers. | |
| II. | Claims 9-15, drawn to a method of using a two dimensional grid for printing using the different positions of the grid to arranged print jobs to be printed. | |
| III. | Claims 16-18, drawn to a method arranging the printing of jobs ahead of the delivery time. | |
| IV. | Claims 19-21, drawn to a method of charging for the print services performed using two different service levels. | |
| V. | Claims 22-25, drawn to a method of printing on a substrate using commodity information and non commodity information. | |
| VI. | Claims 26-29, drawn to a method of printing by bidding for delivery time. | |
| VII. | Claims 30 and 42, drawn to a method of printing using a web browser to update or modify the printing of print jobs. | |
| VIII. | Claim 31, drawn to a method for producing different | print jobs using the same steps. |
| IX. | Claims 32 and 35-37, drawn to a method of printing | using a template. |
| X. | Claims 33-34, drawn to a method of printing color print separations. | jobs using standard processes or color |
| XI. | Claim 38-40, drawn to a method of processing the print | jobs to be shipped. |
| XII. | Claim 41, drawn to a method of routing print jobs using | different entry ports. |

The inventions listed as Groups I-XII do not relate to a single inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1 because, under PCT Rule 13.2, they lack the same or corresponding special technical features for the following reasons: Inventions I-XII have separate utility such as a) distribution of print jobs to different print jobs; b) the use of two dimensional grid to control the processing of different print jobs; c) arranging the printing system to arranged the delivery time of the printer(s); d) the use of different servicing levels within a printer to allow local users or employees to receive free printing services and charging outside people to pay for printing services; e) the printing of print job using different commodity information to process a print job; f) the arranging of priority printing based on bidding for delivery time; g) the use of a web browser to modify or update the jobs being printer; h) the use of a method to speed up printing using the same steps to produce different print jobs; i) the use of a template to print repetitive data; j) the processing of colored print jobs; k) the processing of print jobs after being printed; and l) the processing of print jobs using different ports of entry.

Because these inventions are distinct for the reasons given above and the search required for the one Group is not required for another Group, restriction for examination purposes as indicated is proper.

Because these inventions are distinct for the reasons given above and have acquired a separate status in the art because of their recognized divergent subject matter, restriction for examination purposes as indicated is proper.

CORRECTED VERSION

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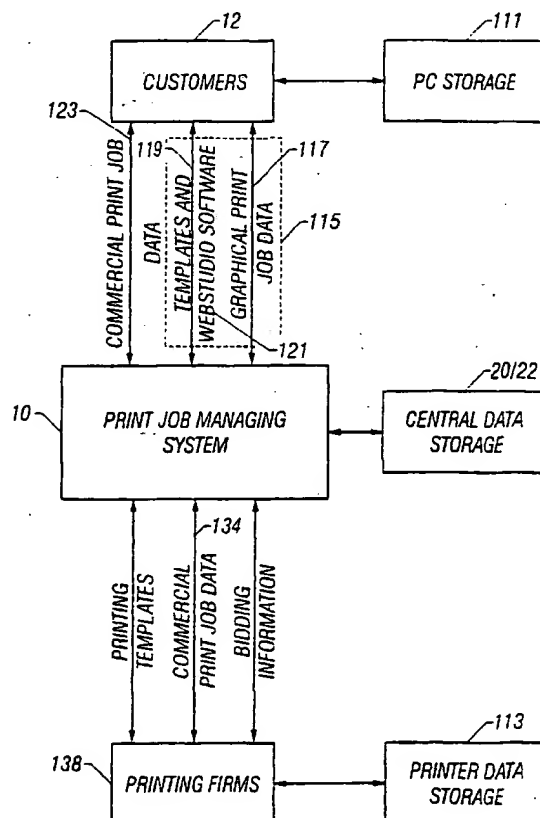
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[Continued on next page]

(54) Title: MANAGING PRINT JOBS



(57) Abstract: The invention provides methods for managing print job (10) such method includes (a) accumulating discrete print jobs electronically from respective customers (12), (b) aggregating the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate print jobs being printable at one time into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate print jobs being printable at one time on units of an integral print medium, and (c) electronically distributing the aggregate print jobs to respective printers for printing.

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Managing Print Jobs

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates to managing print jobs.

BACKGROUND

5 Short-run print jobs, e.g., business cards, letterheads, sell sheets, invitations, announcements, folders, brochures, and marketing materials, are generally printed by commercial printers using relatively small, low cost printing equipment. Because of the set-up time involved in changing from one print job to the next, and the relatively low volumes printed (often less than 1000 units/order), the printing cost is typically
10 relatively high, e.g., \$20-50 per thousand square inches ("MSI"). In some cases, several print jobs are manually "ganged" together (consolidated or aggregated) onto a single master, in an attempt to reduce the average set-up time per order. Another strategy for controlling cost, employed by printers of products such as invitations, office stationery, and address labels, is to offer customers a limited selection of papers,
15 formats and colors from which to choose.

Printing costs per MSI are much lower for high-volume high-quality full-color publishing and packaging print jobs, e.g., food labels, consumer good packaging, magazines, catalogues and high volume marketing materials. Publishing and packaging printing is generally done using large, expensive offset printing presses (either web
20 press or sheet feeding of large-format paper stock) in a highly automated large-volume manufacturing environment. Because these presses have high set-up and amortization costs, their use has been focused on long print runs that are typical in the packaging and publishing segments of the printing market.

Attempts have been made to reduce the high cost of short-run printing. Set-up
25 costs may be reduced by using rapid changeover production machinery, digital technologies, thermographic printing, or single-color offset printing. Typically, these techniques assume that each print job is to be processed as a discrete production run subject to economies of scale based on the quantity of that print job.

Another approach has been to preprint high volumes of a standard base product
30 (e.g., invitation "blanks" bearing high quality color graphics) using high quality offset printing, and then to overprint variable, custom text (e.g., the text of the invitation) for

each order, typically using simpler printing processes and conventional short run printing methods.

Yet another approach has been to reduce the cost of setting up a print job by letting the customer, or an intermediary other than the printer, be responsible for the layout, sales and administration aspects of the customer's order. For example, some companies, such as Hallmark, have provided WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") terminals at which a customer can view a WYSIWYG display of the item to be printed, and then upload information regarding the print job to a local or remote printing site. Another example of this approach is desktop publishing software, which allows a customer to design a print job on-screen.

Computers have been used to reduce cost and improve efficiency of printing processes, e.g., to make the process of page layout, proofing, approvals and transmission to the printing floor more efficient. For example, in the newspaper and printing industries, on-the-fly page markups have been sent directly to the production floor using digital workflow technology. Prepress software and equipment that automates workflow is also used by printers and graphics professionals. Recently, Internet companies such as Noosh and Impresse have been providing services that improve the efficiency of buyer-seller transactions involving printing, e.g., by giving users of their websites the ability to "connect" with a wide variety of print vendors, from short-run demand printers to long-run offset printers.

SUMMARY

The invention features method for managing print jobs.

In one aspect, the invention features a method including (a) accumulating discrete print jobs electronically from respective customers, (b) aggregating the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate print jobs being printable at one time on units of an integral print medium, and (b) electronically distributing the aggregate print jobs to respective printers for printing.

Implementations of this aspect of the invention may include one or more of the following features. The integral print medium may include cut sheets of paper, or large rolls of paper designed for use on offset printing web presses, e.g., rolls having roll widths of 20 inches or more. The print jobs are accumulated through web browsers. Printing of the aggregate print jobs is done during periods of otherwise unused

capacity. Each of the discrete print jobs includes a run of fewer than 5,000 copies. Printing is done on large-scale offset full-color presses. Aggregating is done automatically.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to be printed, the print jobs being arranged on the grid so that at least at some different positions along each of the two dimensions of the grid are print jobs that have different content to be printed on the substrate, (b) printing the print jobs on the substrate at their respective positions defined by the grid, (c) cutting the substrate to separate the print jobs, and (d) distributing at least some of the separated print jobs to different customer locations. In some implementations, the print jobs are in different formats, and all of the print jobs are printed on the substrate at one time.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to cut sheets of a substrate to be printed, printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs into rectangular stacks. In some implementations, each stack defines a separate print job.

The invention also features a method including defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a non-preprinted substrate to be printed, printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to be printed, printing the print jobs in full color on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined by the grid, and cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate the print jobs.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, each of the orders being received at an associated ordering time, each of the orders having an associated delivery time, the periods between the ordering times and the delivery times of at least some of the print jobs being different, aggregating a set of the print jobs that have essentially the same associated delivery time into an aggregate print job to be printed at one time on shared substrate units, and arranging for the production of the aggregate print job at a time that is just ahead of the delivery time. In some implementations, the method also includes adjusting the prices of the discrete print jobs based on the period between the ordering time and the delivery time. The method may also include arranging for the production during periods of unused printing capacity.

The invention also features a method including offering the printing of discrete print jobs to customers in at least two different service levels, one of the service levels including printing the print jobs free for the customers and another of the service levels including charging for the print jobs, receiving orders from customers for print jobs at selected service levels, and aggregating a set of the print jobs for printing at one time on shared substrate units. The service levels may be associated with speed of turnaround, and/or with the presence or absence of third-party advertising on the print job.

In yet another aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, electronically creating and accumulating non-commodity information associated with each of the print jobs, aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one time on shared substrate units, and arranging for the production of the aggregate print job using commodity supplies and services including non-preprinted paper as the common substrate, and commodity inks. The arranging for production may include locating printers having unused capacity suitable for the aggregate print job.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, automating the generation of non-commodity information associated with the print jobs, aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one time on shared substrate units, and arranging for production of the aggregate print job in accordance with the non-commodity information. The non-commodity information may include at least one of content,

approval service, price, delivery terms, color verification services, quantity, and set up steps.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, defining an aggregate print job comprising a set
5 of the discrete print jobs for printing at one time on shared substrate units, the aggregate print job having a delivery time, enabling printers having equipment not economically suitable for completing individual ones of the discrete print jobs to bid competitively for the aggregate print job up to a time just ahead of the delivery time, and awarding the aggregate print job to one of the printers prior to the delivery time. The enabling and
10 awarding may be done electronically.

The invention also features a method including (a) receiving information defining discrete print jobs each of which is alone economically unfeasible for printing on high volume printing equipment, (b) aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the aggregate printing jobs being configured for printing at
15 one time on units of a common substrate, the aggregate print jobs being economically feasible for printing on high volume printing equipment, each of the aggregate printing jobs having a defined delivery time, (c) making the aggregate print jobs available up to just before the delivery time, for competitive bidding by printers having the high volume printing equipment, and (d) awarding each of the aggregate print jobs to the
20 printer with the most competitive bid based on predetermined criteria.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) using a high volume printing machine to produce high volume print jobs, each of the high volume print jobs comprising printing of only a large number of identical images one after the other, (b) determining the availability, between high volumes print jobs, of unused
25 printing capacity, (c) bidding for aggregate print jobs that can be produced economically on the high volume printing machine using the unused printing capacity, each of the aggregate print jobs comprising an aggregation of discrete print jobs that would be economically unfeasible to print separately using the printing machine, and (d) printing at least one of the aggregate print jobs.

30 In a further aspect, the invention features a method including performing graphic design of a discrete print job on a design application that runs on a web browser, transferring the print job to a web server for storage after the graphic design is

performed, modifying the print job on the web browser, and updating the print job on the web server after the modifying is done.

The invention also features a method including aggregating discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs to be produced on units of a common substrate, all of the
5 aggregate print jobs conforming to a standard format, transmitting the aggregate print jobs to a printer electronically, and, at the printer, configuring printing equipment for producing different ones of the aggregate print jobs using the same steps.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) defining a standard template format for containing common graphical information that relates to
10 different discrete print jobs, (b) providing a design tool to enable a designer to create a template that complies with the standard template format and embodies the common graphical information, (c) enabling the designer to deliver the template to a server electronically, (d) enabling users at client machines to use the template to generate different discrete print jobs that conform to the template and include custom graphical
15 information specific to each of the discrete print jobs, and (e) aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs for printing at one time on units of shared substrate.

In yet another aspect, the invention features a method including aggregating discrete high-quality full color print jobs into a single aggregate print job, printing the
20 single aggregate print job using standard process colors and standard un-pre-printed paper on high speed printing equipment, and distributing the aggregate print jobs in electronic files.

The invention also features a method including (a) digitally aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job to be printed at one time on units of a standard
25 shared substrate, the aggregate print job being defined in a standard compressed prepress data format, (b) sending the aggregate print job to a workstation at a printing site, at the printing site, Raster Image Processing the aggregate print job to create standard color separations, (c) using a computer-to-plate process to create plates based on the color separations, (d) loading the plates onto a high volume press in accordance
30 with a standard predefined protocol, (e) loading units of the standard shared substrate onto the press, (f) printing the aggregate print job onto the standard shared substrate, (g) cutting apart the standard shared substrate units to separate the discrete print jobs, and (h) forwarding the discrete print jobs to different customer destinations.

The invention also features a method including (a) aggregating discrete print jobs into a digital aggregate print job to be printed at one time on units of a standard shared substrate, the placement of the discrete printing jobs within the aggregate print job being defined by a digital aggregation template that represents the locations of cuts
5 that will be needed to separate the discrete print jobs from the aggregate print job, (b) placing a physical embodiment of the aggregation template on the units of the standard shared substrate, and (c) using the physical embodiment of the aggregation template as a guide to making cuts to separate the discrete print jobs. The aggregate print job may include a plurality of aggregated sheets, and be identified by an identifier printed on
10 each aggregated sheet within the aggregate print job. Information printed on the aggregation template may be used to automatically identify each discrete print job.

In another aspect, the invention features a method including (a) aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job, (b) printing the aggregate print job at a printing site, (c) separating the discrete print jobs by cutting apart the aggregate print
15 jobs, (d) electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using a print job identifier, (e) at the printing site placing the print jobs into shipment bins of a parcel carrier that tracks shipments electronically using a shipment identifier, (f) associating the print job identifier with the parcel carrier's shipment identifier, and (g) enabling customers of the discrete print jobs to track the progress of delivery of
20 their discrete print jobs electronically.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including (a) aggregating discrete print jobs of respective customers into an aggregate print job, (b) printing the aggregate print job at a printing site, (c) separating the discrete print jobs by cutting
25 apart the aggregate print jobs, (d) electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using a print job identifier, (e) shipping the discrete print jobs essentially as soon as they are printed, cut and packaged, (f) electronically billing the customers in response to completion of the printing and delivery of the discrete print jobs to a shipper for shipment.

The invention also features a method including printing an aggregate print job,
30 cutting the aggregate print job apart to form different discrete print jobs, automatically printing shipping labels for shipping the different discrete print jobs to different respective customers, and applying the labels to the different discrete print jobs in accordance with identifiers on the labels.

In a further aspect, the invention features a method including (a) providing different kinds of entry ports into a print job execution system, each of the entry ports enabling a user to create interactively a full color print job in accordance with a pre-defined design template, (b) at each of the ports, generating a digital print job file based
5 on the design template and design input of the user, all of the print job files being expressed in a standard design data format, (c) routing all of the digital print job files electronically to an aggregation system, (d) at the aggregation system, assembling selected ones of the digital print job files into aggregate print jobs, all of the aggregate print jobs being expressed in a standard prepress format, and (e) routing different ones
10 of the aggregate print jobs electronically to different printers for printing.

The invention also features an apparatus that includes (a) web browsers configured for interactive design by users of discrete print jobs, (b) a central storage for information about the discrete print jobs that results from interaction with the users, (c)
15 a scalable group of web servers that interact with the web browsers and with the central storage, and (d) a scalable group of printing servers configured to aggregate the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs and deliver the aggregate print jobs electronically to printers.

Among the advantages of the invention, short run print jobs can be printed using high-quality, large-volume printing equipment, while reducing printing cost
20 significantly, improving print job quality as compared to alternative short run printing processes, and improving capacity utilization of the printing equipment. In some implementations, the printing cost is less than 10%, or even less than 5%, of the cost of printing an identical item using traditional short run printing techniques. Some implementations also provide a fast possible turnaround time from when the customer
25 places an order until the customer's print job is done, e.g., less than two hours, and allow queuing of print jobs so that expedited print jobs are printed first and lower priority print jobs are printed later. A large number of customers with short-run print jobs can be served by a relatively small number of industrial print subcontractors, to achieve end-to-end automation and aggregation of the print jobs.

30 Each customer can design a print job directly on a web browser and, if desired, upload the customer's own graphics, e.g., a logo design. Use of the web browser based design capability can replace or enhance traditional methods of graphic design, in which a graphic designer translates a customer's sketch and/or verbal description into a

finished design and provides one or more proofs for the customer's approval prior to printing.

The invention allows the printing subcontractors' production floors to be organized and operated in a manner consistent with the best-in-class practices for high-volume, high quality publishing and packaging printers, despite the fragmented nature of the custom printing jobs involved. The invention also features a scalable systems architecture, to allow the systems of the invention to accommodate higher volumes of customers and/or printing jobs. Based on real time information provided by printers, order flow can be redirected to those printers who, at a given moment in time, have excess production capacity and are willing to sell that capacity at a price lower than their "fully loaded" production cost.

Customer orders can consist of a variety of document types, layouts and quantities, for a potentially infinite range of order characteristics. Yet the traditionally high cost of managing this variability of order characteristics is reduced or eliminated through a conversion of the variability into a consistently formatted, repetitive stream of pre and post press digital information that is compatible with printing industry standards. Groups of customers (e.g., multiple customers within a single company) are able to share and centrally control common document characteristics (e.g., a template for a brochure layout or a business card design that is shared by multiple persons within the same company), while decentralizing individual purchase decisions, order entry and modifications to text or other variable elements within the documents.

Based on market information and printer information, received both previously and in "real time", the web server host can modify the price, delivery, and product options that are offered to a given customer or set of customers. For instance, if excess production capacity will be available in the next several hours, printers may be willing to temporarily cut their wholesale price in order to fill the near-term capacity, and the web server host could, in response, immediately modify the offers displayed to customers via the Internet so as to increase demand. There is no incremental (marginal/variable) cost to processing a customer's order in a very rapid time (e.g., two hours), and the system allows real time rescheduling of order queues to manage capacity fluctuations. This allows the web server host to charge a higher price for expedited orders without incurring additional cost to provide the expedited service.

Other features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the description and drawings.

DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

Figs. 1, 1A, and 1B are schematic block diagrams of a system according to one
5 implementation of the invention. Figs. 1A and 1B are the top and bottom halves, respectively, of one diagram.

Figs. 2-2A are schematic top views of layouts of print jobs.

Fig. 3 is a flow diagram illustrating the designing of a print job on a web browser.

10 Figs. 4-4W are webpages according to one implementation.

Fig. 5 is a schematic diagram showing connection of elements of the system.

Fig. 6 is a flow diagram of a printing and post-press process.

Fig. 7 is a schematic diagram showing the farm configuration of servers in a system according to one implementation.

15 Fig. 8 is a schematic diagram showing a queue processing system.

DESCRIPTION

Implementations of the invention include interrelated elements. These elements and their relationships will first be discussed briefly and then later in more detail.

An implementation of a print job management system 10 is shown
20 schematically in Figs. 1, 1A, and 1B. A potentially enormous number (e.g., thousands or even hundreds of thousands or millions) of individual and commercial customers 12, wishing to place orders for discrete print jobs (generally short run printing jobs, i.e., jobs of less than 40,000 units, typically 250-5,000 units), access the Internet 14 via web
browsers 13 (or similar interactive communication software) running on personal
25 computers or other electronic devices 11. Customers can access the system through any one of several different types of entry ports 15 into the print job management system, where some types of entry ports may be characterized by their economic and market characteristics. The types of entry ports could include home office/small office
computer entry ports 15a, intermediary ports (such as boutique stationery stores) 15b,
30 and large corporate entry ports 15c (such as a Communications Department of a large corporation). Other entry ports need not be based on web browsers, but could be, for

example email links 15d and dial up voice telephone lines 15e. The system can also be integrated with bidding systems or "eHub" bidding sites such as Noosh, Impresse, Collabria and Ariba (eHub portals 15f).

The term "print job" refers to an individual print job, such as a single design
5 version of a brochure for a business in a given quantity such as 1000 brochures. The term "order" is used to refer to a group of print jobs that are ordered at the same time, such as a business card, letterhead, and envelopes for a business. For some customers, individual print jobs could be part of a large corporate communication program that would include hundreds of different documents each bearing common graphic elements
10 and custom text associated with each document.

Through the Internet 14, each customer can access a website 16, that includes a website studio 16a which provides design software that is made available from a central web server 18. The website studio, which will be discussed in further detail below, allows each customer to design one or more custom printing jobs, e.g., business cards,
15 brochures, postcards, folders, letterhead, and envelopes. The customer chooses from a limited selection of standardized papers, formats (provided to the user in the form of templates with user-specified data fields), colors and quantities. The website studio software is downloaded from the server as part of web pages displayed to the user, runs on the user's browser, and enables the user to perform simple design functions by
20 completing a selected template using a Design Wizard, or more complex design functions using a Design Studio, locally on his browser. Typically, only the results of the design process are uploaded to the server as a print job. The templates are created using an XML format or other appropriate format. Alternatively, a customer or a professional designer could generate his own template, using the website studio itself,
25 or using desktop publishing software, and upload it to the server website studio.

As shown in Fig. 1, two kinds of data pass back and forth between the customers and the system, and there are two series of processes that handle this data. The data can be categorized as graphical print data 115 (in Fig. 1, graphical print job data 117, templates 119 and web studio software 121), and commercial print job data
30 123. Processing of this data is split into two pieces: what goes on between the customers and the system, shown in Fig. 1A, and what goes on between the system and the printers, shown in Fig. 1B. As shown in Fig. 1, there is storage at various points in the system to store the data. For example, some of it is stored in the customer's PC

storage 111, some in the system's data storage 20/22, and some at the printer data storage 113.

The system's data storage is shown in more detail in Fig. 1A. The data input by a customer when an order is placed is stored in a central database 20 and/or a network storage 22, depending on the nature of the data, as will be discussed below. The network storage 22 stores all of the graphic files that define a print job, e.g., logos, fonts, backgrounds, layouts and frame designs, while the central database 20 stores, among other things, all of the non-graphical information, e.g., the text to be printed and the business information that is needed to get the jobs printed and delivered. The central database 20 also stores information regarding the customer, e.g., the customer's name and address, and stores the non-graphical elements of the website studio templates (the graphical elements that are stored in the network storage are referenced by the templates and document layouts).

Once the customer has finished designing the print job the customer places an order, e.g., using a Purchase Wizard 16b, as discussed below. The customer's print job is sent to the server in XML format, and the XML file is then converted by the server into a digital format, e.g., into a PostScript file 128 (Fig. 1B). The backend printing servers 28 then automatically aggregate, or "gang together", the customer's PostScript file with multiple PostScript files from other customers to produce a consolidated print sheet (a "layout"). To achieve this, the backend servers assemble the individual PostScript files to create the layout 130 (Fig. 1B), with different individual print jobs arranged on respective portions of the layout. For example, as shown in Fig. 2, 133 different business card print jobs 50 of identical size could be aggregated into a layout and printed on a single large printing sheet 52, e.g., a large format printing sheet measuring 1.0 meter by 0.6 meter. In other examples, different sizes and shapes of print jobs can be aggregated, e.g., as shown in Fig. 2A and discussed below. The organization of the different print jobs on the layout 130 is defined by aggregation templates that characterize where cuts need to be made after printing in order to separate the different print jobs. The choice of which print jobs to place onto a given layout and in what arrangement is discussed below.

The commercial information related to the customer's order (e.g., the shipping address, shipping date, etc.) is stored in a customer information file 132 (Fig. 1B). The customer information file 132 is aggregated with other customer's files (the same

customers whose PostScript files have been aggregated onto the layout), to create an aggregate meta file 134 which contains all of the commercial information for the customers' print jobs. The aggregate meta file 134 also includes commercial information relating to the printing run, e.g., a batch number ("template layout reference number"), the number of sheets to be printed, and the cutting template to be used to cut the printed sheets into individual printed print jobs.

The aggregate meta file is posted by the backend server to a website 136 that is accessible to printing firms 138 wishing to sell their printing services to the web server host. The aggregate meta file 134 includes the commercial details of the print run that will be performed using the PostScript layout file 130 (e.g., number of sheets, type of paper, and deadline). As will be discussed below, printing firms with unused capacity bid for a contract to print the print run. Generally, the contract is automatically awarded to the bidder providing the most competitive bid based on predetermined criteria, e.g., lead time, quality, history, price or other factors. The successful bidder's contractual obligations, and the PostScript layout file and aggregate meta file, are then transmitted by the backend server to that printing firm, e.g., to a server 32 located at the printing site.

The PostScript layout file is converted at the printing facility 29, during RIPing (Raster Image Processing), to the color separated prepress format that is used by standard computer-to-plate systems that produce four-color photolithographic plates 110 (Fig. 1B) for use on automated large scale offset printing presses 30. By large scale offset printing presses we mean either (a) sheet-fed presses with sheet formats of 530x740 or larger and straight printing rates of 12,000 sheets per hour or higher, or (b) web presses with roll widths of 20 inches or higher and printing rates of 40,000 iph (inches per hour). Large scale offset printing presses include, e.g., Heidelberg, Speedmaster, and other similar or larger printing press production systems.) The server 32 provides a browser interface for use by people who operate the printing presses ("print operators"). Information about how to set up and perform each of the print runs is provided in a simple format to the print operators through the browser interface, as discussed below. The plates are used to print a desired number of copies on a standard printing paper that is loaded by the print operator using standard four-color process inks, based on meta file information that is provided by the backend printing server to the operator on a web-browser based computer display 32 at the operator's station.

The printed sheets are then transferred to a cutting station 140 (Fig. 1B), where they are cut and sorted into individual print jobs 142, as will be discussed below. In some implementations (such as for presentation folders or envelopes) additional post-print processing is performed such as folding and/or gluing. The orders are then
5 immediately shipped to the respective customers, using shipping information that is displayed on a computer display 34 in the shipping area of the printing facility.

Most customers "pre-pay" (e.g., provide their credit card billing information) upon placing their orders. Some corporate customers may be invoiced. Generally, the customer's credit card is not debited until after the customer's order has been shipped.
10 The backend printing server sends a meta file 144 back to the web server after a shipment has been made, informing the web server of the status of each customer's order. Once an order has been successfully shipped, the backend server interacts with a processing center 146 so that the customer's account will be debited, or, in the case of a corporate customer, sends the corporation an invoice.

Customer Interface with the Internet

The only requirement for use of the print job management system by a customer who is accessing the system through one of the types of browser-based entry ports described above is a computer that is linked to the Internet by a standard recent web
20 browser, e.g., Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher. The customer accesses the website 16 by entering the website URL address into the browser. Other entry ports do not even require that the customer have access to a browser, e.g., a dial-up voice telephone link 15e could be used to enter information by voice or punching keys on the telephone keypad.

25 The design and order process is conducted through the website. The rest of the system is "invisible" to the customer. The customer's order is printed and delivered to the customer without any requirement for further interaction, although the customer may use the website to track the progress of the order through the printing process and the shipment of the order to the customer.

The Website Studio

The website studio allows the customer to design his own print job, using the browser for design selection and editing. The website studio uses a user-friendly "what
30

you see is what you get" ("WYSIWYG") functionality that allows the customer to choose a base design for a desired printed item (e.g., business card or stationery), and then edit the design. The functionality is similar to that of existing desktop word processing publishing products, making the website easy for most customers to use.

5 As shown in Fig. 3, using the browser and the Design Wizard portion of the website studio the customer can choose a printed item from a wide selection (e.g., business cards, letterhead, invitations, brochures and marketing materials), choose basic options such as page orientation (portrait or landscape), view a variety of design templates that are available for the item and choose one, complete the template (e.g., by
10 supplying new text, uploading graphics files and adjusting fonts), and save the resulting design. The customer can then add the item to his shopping cart, place an order, or perform further design modifications using the Design Studio portion of the website studio. The design process will be described in further detail below with reference to Figs. 4-4O. Once the customer is satisfied with the design, the customer can add the
15 design to his shopping cart as a print job, and use the Purchase Wizard, discussed below with reference to Figs. 4P-4W, or other purchase function, to place an on-line order and pre-pay for the order over a secure connection.

The customer is offered a relatively limited selection of standard papers, to allow easy and cost efficient aggregation of print jobs and printer set-up, as will be
20 discussed below. Customers also select from certain predetermined print quantities, e.g., multiples of 250 units (250, 500, 1000, etc.).

The procedure described above would be followed by a customer entering the system from his individual PC. If other entry ports are used, for example an intermediary port 15b, some of these steps may be bypassed, e.g., the customer may not
25 use a Purchase Wizard to place and pay for the order.

Figs. 4-4O show webpages from a website studio used in one implementation of the invention. To begin the design process, the customer first navigates from a home page (not shown), to the Design Wizard (Figs. 4-4E). The Design Wizard is configured to appear to the customer like a standard Windows® Wizard application, e.g., with
30 "back", "next" and "finish" buttons, giving the customer a feeling of familiarity and user-friendliness. In the Design Wizard, the customer selects the item that the customer wishes to design (e.g., business cards or other items, in Figs. 4-4E). For business card design, the Design Wizard includes a Welcome screen (Fig. 4), an Orientation screen

(Fig. 4A) that allows the customer to choose between horizontal and vertical cards, a Template Browser screen (Fig. 4B) that allows the customer to choose between a variety of different design templates (not shown), an Information screen (Fig. 4C) at which the customer fills in a number of fields to complete the selected design template with the customer's information, and Review screens (Figs. 4D and 4E) that allow the customer to review the front and back of the resulting business card. After reviewing the card, the customer can decide to (a) go back and edit the card, (b) go to the Checkout (the Purchase Wizard described below), or (c) go to the Design Studio to perform more complicated design functions (e.g., changing fonts and color schemes).

10 A Design Studio used in one implementation of the invention is shown in Figs. 4F-4O. When the customer opens the Design Studio, the customer will first see an initial screen (Fig. 4F) with a loading bar, indicating the status of the downloading of the Design Studio to the customer's browser. Each time something (e.g., a font) is downloaded to the customer's browser from the web server, a similar loading bar will be provided. The Design Studio is configured to have toolbars and other features that are similar to those used in standard word processing and desktop publishing user interfaces, so that again the customer will have a feeling of familiarity with the software and will find the software easy to use. In the case of the loading bar, the user is comfortable with the notion that the application is loading even though it is not being loading in the usual sense of being moved from a hard disk to memory in the user's computer. The Design Studio also includes a standard "Startup Tips" dialog box (Fig. 4G), like other Windows® applications, and a Help system.

25 In the Design Studio, the customer can select a background from a variety of choices (Fig. 4H), use a "picker" dropdown list (Fig. 4I) to select other design features (logos, card layouts, color schemes, designs and fonts), modify those design features, add a logo (Fig. 4I), select a color scheme (Fig. 4J), change the color of selected text (Fig. 4K), change the properties of an image, e.g., the logo (Fig. 4L), view the backside of the card (Fig. 4M), and preview exactly how the front and back of the printed card will look (Figs. 4N and 4O). The Design Studio features in-place editing, i.e., the customer can double-click on an item and change it directly. While in the Design Studio, the customer can make as many modifications to the fonts, colors, card layout, etc., as desired. The customer can also choose to view the design at low resolution, medium resolution or high resolution. In some implementations, the customer can add

text or graphics to the back of the card, in which case in most implementations the existing "advertisement" text is automatically removed and this removal is automatically chosen as a purchase option in the Purchase Wizard. The customer can also choose a blank back side as a purchase option.

5 If desired, a customer using the Design Studio can upload a graphic file, e.g., containing the customer's logo. The file can be, e.g., created using graphic design software, downloaded from the Internet, taken with a digital camera, or scanned in with an image scanner. Generally, the file should have a relatively high resolution, e.g., at least 300 dpi. Most standard graphics file types are supported. The customer's graphic
10 file is stored in network storage 22, and is referenced by the XML file created by the customer in the website studio and added to the PostScript file for the customer's print job when the PostScript file is created.

When the customer is satisfied with the design of the card, the customer can proceed to the checkout (the Purchase Wizard), or can save the finished design (the
15 customer's print job) for later purchase. In either case, the customer's print job is saved in XML format in the central database 20. The XML file includes the size and orientation of the document, the number of pages, and, for each page, the margins, background, frame design (if any), and the text and graphics elements on the page and their characteristics (color, font, size, etc.).

20 The website studio is designed for use by customers who have no graphic arts experience or specialized software knowledge, e.g., small business owners who want to "do it all" and workers in companies whose goal is to update information, such as the company address or telephone number, prior to ordering or reordering printed materials.

25 For users with graphic design experience and desktop publishing software, the web server provides a full toolset that is compatible with leading desktop publishing software such as Quark Express and Adobe InDesign software. Thus, a print job can be designed by a graphic artist, using professional desktop publishing software, and then uploaded to the web server for distributed access to other users at the customer
30 company. For example, the graphic artist can define fixed and variable fields, and an administrator or other designated employees at the company can then be given access to input information (e.g., company address and telephone) into the variable fields, without changing the fixed fields (e.g., the overall design and graphics of the print job).

As a result, customers having access to desktop publishing software can create their own templates, rather than being limited to the templates offered by the web server host. When the template is uploaded to the web server, it is split into graphic data (logos, fonts, backgrounds and designs) and all other data. The graphic data remains in its original format and is stored in network storage 22, as discussed above. The remaining data and layout information is converted to XML format and stored in the central database 20.

Unlike other previous, server-based approaches, the website studio utilizes browser-based processing to allow high-speed processing when the customer is working interactively to design a print job. The website studio utilizes Javascript and DHTML technologies for the graphic design by the customer, i.e., the web pages that the customer receives and views include not only the static visual display, but also graphic design programs (the website studio) that will run on the customer's browser just as any other application runs on a computer. Thus, the customer can use the browser interface to do graphical design without interacting with, and thus consuming the resources of, the web server.

So that the website studio can be quickly downloaded by the customer, in most implementations the graphic elements, e.g., fonts, backgrounds and logos, used in the website studio are stored in a library in the network storage 22, a copy of which is stored at the printing firm information system 29, as will be discussed below. Thus, a graphic element need only be downloaded by the web server to the browser when it is selected by the customer during the design process. The XML file that results from the design process (the customer's print job) will reference the appropriate information in the centrally stored library. The library is replicated at the printing firms, so that the graphic elements can be inserted during RIPing using OPI (Open Prepress Interface) techniques. The library can be distributed periodically using a CD-ROM publication or other distribution approach so that all parties to the system are working from the same library.

Post-design processes, such as high resolution proofing and processing files, are queued separately and processed by the backend servers independently of the web server, because the customer is not waiting for these processes to be completed and thus processing speed is not a concern.

The web studio may also include a dynamic shopping cart, which allows the customer to access the shopping cart at any time during the design process to add or delete items.

The web studio application is based on modules, to provide an open
5 development architecture. Different modules are plugged into the core libraries to provide additional functionalities, e.g., the Undo/Redo History Manager is a separate module that could be deactivated, by removing a few links, or replaced by a new and more powerful module complying with the same architecture as the current module.

The web studio application uses style sheets to "style" the interface into a usual
10 Windows®-like interface. Using style sheets allows the application to have a smaller overall size, as styling policy is centralized in a few modules that are reused in the application's web pages. Providing a centralized styling policy also allows the web server host to change the look and feel of the web studio interface at any time, just by changing the styles.

15 In one implementation, the modules use Internet Explorer XML DOM implementations. Using these functionalities, a real-time renderer can be created which will take any XML document and, using XML style-sheets (XSL) transform the document into a WYSIWYG preview. The use of these integrated functionalities allows a small and fast rendering/edition engine.

20 Using HTCs (HTML components), scalability and processing speed can be enhanced. Also, the web studio application can be designed to behave differently on the result of the XSL transformation, just by using a different previewing style sheet (CSS). Thus, after rendering, the resulting preview can be a simple "flat" preview, or an editable document that the user can interact with.

25 If the XML Document model is extended to VML (Vector Markup Language), the web site studio is then able to render documents created by most common office applications, e.g., Microsoft Word. The user can then modify such a document and send it to the webserver for printing. This feature enhances the compatibility of the web studio with usual Windows® applications. Extension of the XML document
30 model to VML also allows the web studio application to draw more complex shapes (e.g., ovals, rounded rectangles and curves), apply color gradients and color schemes to complex objects, and use transformations, making it possible for a user to design and

print complex documents to suit his or her needs.

The Purchase Wizard

A Purchase Wizard used in one implementation of the invention is shown in
5 Figs. 4P-4W. Like the Design Wizard, the Purchase Wizard appears to the customer as
a standard Windows Wizard application. The Wizard may be configured to run on the
user's browser, or on the web server, depending on the preference and resources of the
web server host. The final purchase information is transmitted over a secure server
connection. The Wizard includes a Welcome screen (Fig. 4P), a Review screen (Fig.
10 4Q) that gives the customer a final opportunity to review the design, an Address screen
(Fig. 4R) that allows the customer to input a shipping address and select an order
quantity, one or more Options screens that offer the customer choices of upgrades, e.g.,
to remove the advertising text on the reverse side (Fig. 4S), a Delivery screen (Fig. 4T)
that allows the customer to select delivery options, e.g., expedited delivery, a screen
15 that notifies the customer that the order is being submitted to the server (Fig. 4U), a
Billing Information screen that allows the customer to input billing information (Fig.
4V), and a Payment Confirmation screen that asks the customer for final confirmation
of the order.

Once an order has been placed, the server stores the customer's order
20 information into the central database 20, including the commercial information
regarding the customer's order.

In some implementations, relatively low cost items, e.g., business cards, are
offered to customers by the web server host at no charge. The cost of printing these
items can be recouped by the web server host by charging a fee for upgrades, e.g.,
25 faster delivery, and sales of complementary items such as business card cases. For
example, as discussed above, the web server host may include an advertisement (e.g.,
"Free Business Cards at www.vistaprint.com") on the back of each free card, and
charge a fee if the customer does not wish this advertisement to appear on the
customer's cards.

30 For all orders, the web server host may, if desired, charge additional fees for
enhancements such as expedited service and gloss or other special finishes.

Customers can obtain support through the website by visiting a FAQ
("frequently asked questions") or help page (not shown). In some implementations,

the website will also offer interactive online support, support via email, and/or a toll-free number that customers can call for telephone support. If desired by the website host, access to interactive online support, email and telephone support may be restricted to certain preferred customers, e.g., corporate customers having accounts with the website host. Alternatively, the website host may offer these services to all customers at no charge or may charge a fee for access.

As discussed above, the customer can access the website studio using his own computer and browser, or can use another type of entry port, e.g., an intermediary port 15b (such as a terminal at a boutique stationery store), or a large corporate entry port 15c (such as a Communications Department of a large corporation). The entry port need not be based on a web browser, but could be, for example, an email link or dial up telephone line. The customer may use the website studio without assistance, or may describe the desired print job to someone else, e.g., a graphic designer or salesperson at the boutique stationery store, who will use the website studio to design the print job.

The Web Server

In some types of entry port, the web server provides the interaction of the customer with the web studio. The web server uses a typical three-tier architecture to respond to all of the customer page requests, by using server-side scripting to access server objects that implement the business logic, these objects in turn interacting with the central database and network storage to access the necessary data.

Data Storage

Hundreds of thousands (potentially millions) of customer relationships are managed by the system. Each customer order typically involves a relatively large file due to the nature of color graphic printing data. The data storage capacity of the system is robust enough to handle high levels of data storage and data access. The data storage is also capable of acting as a link between the front end at which orders are placed, the design studio, the backend printing servers, and shipping, accounting and marketing systems. A data storage system that is capable of meeting these requirements is an Oracle RDBMS running on a Unix box or a Microsoft SQL Server 7.

All data is stored in either the central database 20 or the network storage 22. Stored data includes business-related information such as information pertaining to customers and orders, and design data specific to each customer's print job.

Network storage 22 includes one or more network attached storage (NAS) systems, and is configured to store all graphical objects that are used by the Design Wizard and Studio and that are uploaded by customers, including logos, backgrounds, fonts and frame designs. The network storage includes a library, which contains all of the backgrounds, logos and fonts that are used by the Design Wizard and Studio. Customer uploaded information is not stored in the library. The library is replicated and sent to each of the printing firms used by the system for print runs, and the contents of the library are referenced by the PostScript layout files sent to the printing firms. The network storage may also contain the web pages used in the website 16.

A very large amount of data is stored in the network storage 22, e.g. up to several terabytes depending on the number of customers using the system. The network storage 22 is completely server independent (it includes its own enclosed CPU) and is directly connected to the local area network (a local area network internally operated by the web server host, including the web servers, the backend servers, and the storage devices), making the stored data available to connected servers, i.e., the web server(s) 18 and the backend printing servers 28. As of the writing of this description, a single NAS system can typically handle from 20 gigabytes to one terabyte of data. Thus, as data space needs increase more disks can be added to the NAS (this operation typically does not require a service shutdown), or, when the limit of each NAS is reached, an additional NAS can be added to the system. As shown in Fig. 5, the web servers, central database, and backend servers are connected to the network storage by an Ethernet.

Central database 20 is a relational database management system (RDBMS) that handles all non-graphical data. This database is designed to handle millions of records. As is customary, the data is organized in tabular form. In one implementation, the database includes the following tables, which include the listed fields. (More, fewer or different tables may be used in other implementations, as needed.)

| <u>Table</u> | <u>Fields</u> |
|---------------------------|--|
| Products | unique product (item) ID (i.e., the SKU #) and name, product description, list price, weight (for shipping) |
| 5 | |
| Print Jobs | unique print job ID and name, XML content of print job, SKU # of item (card, envelope, etc.), creation date, last modification date |
| Templates | unique template ID and name, XML content of template, SKU # of item (card, envelope, etc.), creation date, last modification date, template category |
| 10 | |
| Template Categories | unique category ID and name, parent category ID (tree structure), category graphical representation |
| 15 | |
| Shoppers | unique shopper ID, shopper name, number of logins, last login date, email address/login ID, password |
| Orders | unique order number, reference to shopper ID, order date, pricing and tax information, status of order, credit card authorization number, shipping method, shipper tracking information, customer shipping and billing information including priority of order |
| 20 | |
| Ordered Items | ordered item number, order number (from orders table), SKU # of item, quantity, pricing information, print job ID |
| 25 | |
| Shopping Carts | Same fields as Orders, but temporary storage |
| Shopping Cart Items | Same fields as Ordered items, but temporary storage |
| 30 | |
| Printer Batches (Layouts) | batch ID number, date sent, status, printer ID number and name, quantity of print run, action to be taken when layout is created (none, notify print operator, send layout to printer, notify and send) |
| 35 | |
| Printer Batch Items | batch item ID number, ordered item number (from ordered items table), batch ID number (from printer batches table), status of item |

Data stays in the database as long as it is needed by the system. Data is maintained in the Orders table after a customer's order has been completed and shipped, to facilitate reordering. To avoid overloading the database, the web server host may place a time limit on reordering, or charge the customer a nominal fee for keeping his information in the database for an extended period of time.

Each time a layout is created, an entry is created in the Layouts table. Depending on the action to be taken, the print operator may be notified by email, or an extranet query can be set up to query the table, or a process may be running at the printer that checks the table for new layouts.

The following status codes may be used in the "status" field in the Orders table:

| Status Code | Value | Status description |
|---------------|-------|--|
| ST_READY | 0 | The order has been submitted by the customer but at this point has not been processed. |
| ST_PROCESSING | 1 | This order is being processed. |
| ST_CANCELLED | 2 | This order has been cancelled. |
| ST_REPEAT | 3 | There was a problem with this order so it has been re-submitted. This code is treated by the system in the same way as an "unprocessed" order. (Re-submitted orders can only be re-submitted a few times before a warning is raised) |
| ST_DISPATCHED | 4 | This order has been dispatched and the tracking information has been updated. |
| ST_COMPLETED | 5 | The customer's credit card has been charged. This order has now been completed. |

15 *Order Queuing, Prepress Aggregation and Data Conversion*

Prepress aggregation is performed by a prepress aggregation module of the backend printing server, which includes a multi-user PostScript file creator, shown as item 200 in Fig. 8. The file creator collects all of the print jobs that have been received by the web server and queued for printing. The file creator includes four queue-

processing components, as follows. The first component 202 creates individual PostScript files 204 for each customer's design, and individual meta files 206, referenced to each customer's PostScript file, that contain job tracking information and other commercial information related to the customer's order. The second component 5 208 collects these PostScript files, according to aggregation parameters (e.g., job tracking information and size of the printing paper to be used), and aggregates (or "gangs") them to produce a PostScript file 210 that contains "N-up" designs, the value of N being dependent on the design size, the paper size, and the exact layout required due to requirements such as edge bleed. The third component 212 does an automatic 10 "pre-flight check" on each aggregated PostScript file, thus avoiding the need for further manual intervention. The fourth component 214 optimizes production scheduling and routes the final aggregated PostScript file to a Raster Image Processor (RIP) 220 at the printing cell.

The print jobs are arranged spatially on the master, rather than in chronological 15 order. As a result, several types of items can be aggregated and arranged on a single layout, e.g., postcards, invitations and business cards. For example, as shown in Fig. 2A, the layout can include business cards 50, postcards 53 and invitations 55. If any of the aggregated print jobs are to be printed on both sides, the entire layout will be printed on both sides, with blank areas for any print jobs that are printed only on one 20 side. Some items, e.g., envelopes, generally cannot be aggregated with other types of items because of their specific post-press processing requirements.

Aggregation may be performed in accordance with one of a number of standard aggregation templates, as noted above, or can be done "on the fly", in any arrangement that will fit within the bounds of the paper sheet to be printed. The prepress 25 aggregation module, a rules-based program, aggregates print jobs by scanning the Ordered Items table of the central database and searching for items (print jobs) that have the same printing requirements, e.g., the same delivery date, paper grade, and post press processing requirements. Scanning generally continues until enough print jobs have been located to fill a layout of a given size. The XML files corresponding to the 30 selected print jobs are then pulled from the Document Table, converted to PostScript files and aggregated, as discussed above.

Printing is generally performed in a base print run of a standard number of sheets, e.g., 250 sheets. The prepress aggregation module automatically deals with a

print quantity that is greater than the number of sheets in the base print run by allocating that print file to one or more extra position(s) on the consolidated sheet (master). For example, if the base print run is 250 sheets and a customer orders a print quantity of 500, the customer's design would occupy two positions on the master, 5 whereas if the customer orders a print quantity of 1000 four positions would be occupied. The prepress aggregation module is also able to differentiate between these different quantity orders, and thus when sufficient order volume is being generated at, e.g., 500 units, the module will create a print file with each order occupying only a single position and increase the base print run to 500 sheets, further reducing unit cost. 10 Also, in the unlikely event that insufficient orders are received over a period of time, one or more position(s) on the master may be left blank.

In some implementations, the prepress aggregation module is configured to provide digital management of queues to allow a customer to choose to have his order expedited for an additional cost. Expedited orders are queued ahead of non-expedited 15 orders, so that non-expedited orders will be printed later, e.g., 5-7 days later, than expedited orders which are printed immediately. As a result, all orders can be shipped immediately after printing, without the need for the printing firm to sort out and hold back non-expedited orders. If there are a few particularly high priority jobs waiting to be printed, the program will aggregate these jobs and send them to be printed 20 immediately, without waiting for enough orders to be received to fill a layout.

The Backend Printing Interface

The backend printing servers do not interact directly with the customers. The backend printing servers do the processing (e.g., print job aggregation and printer 25 preparation and optimization) that occurs after the customers have designed the print job and placed orders. Generally, communications between the backend printing servers and the print subcontractors are handled over dedicated leased lines due to the high volume of real-time data transfer from the backend print servers to the print production floor.

30 After the print jobs have been aggregated and queued by the prepress aggregation module, as described above, the resulting layout and aggregate meta file are sent by the backend printing servers to designated printing firms. The printing firm to which the data is sent may be selected by an automated bidding process, which will

be described below. The digital data is then used to make color-separated offset printing plates in accordance with the layout. The printing plates are generally prepared in advance of the time allotted for the print run, e.g., the layout and meta file are sent at least an hour before the scheduled print run and the plates are formed
5 immediately (plate forming generally takes about 10-15 minutes or less).

Once the printing plates have been formed, the operator of the printing press loads the specified grade and quantity of printing paper for the aggregate print run, e.g., 250 sheets plus "overage" for a 250 sheet run of business cards. For this purpose, the operator refers to a browser-based terminal at his work-station, which displays
10 information from the meta file concerning the print run. The print run is then performed, resulting in the desired number of printed sheets, e.g., a stack of 250 printed sheets for a 250 sheet run. The system can organize multiple aggregate print runs that use the same paper base, thus eliminating the need for paper changes.

15 *Post-Press Processing*

Referring to Figs. 1B and 6, there are several steps that take place after a print run. These steps include cutting, post-forming (in some cases), sorting, packing and shipping. These steps are described in detail below.

Print jobs that are part of an order (e.g., letterhead) can be held until other print
20 jobs that are part of the same order (e.g., envelopes) are ready. (In some cases, the different parts of a customer's order may be printed at different printers, in which case they will be shipped separately.) In some cases shipments may also be tracked and customers informed of the location/status of their orders.

25 *Cutting and Forming*

To cut the stack of sheets into individual customers' print jobs, the operator selects an appropriate template by again referring to the terminal information, and/or by referring to a batch number (or "template-layout reference number") on the printing plate or printed in the margin area of the printed sheets (e.g., a bar code 51, Fig. 2).
30 The sheets are moved, as a stack, to a cutting station (e.g., a guillotine cutter), the template is placed on top of the stack of sheets, and the operator enters the template-layout reference number into another terminal to program the guillotine cutter (or the template-layout reference number is automatically downloaded to the terminal). The

guillotine cutter then cuts the stack of sheets, forming individual stacks of items (e.g., business cards, postcards, etc.). In high volume applications, the guillotine cutter can be replaced by automatic cutting or blanking equipment such as is used for cutting labels. While a guillotine cutter is used for most items, e.g., business cards, postcards, and other flat items), some items will require other post forming processes. For example, envelopes are formed using standard envelope forming equipment, including a hydraulic die cutter and an envelope folding and gluing machine. Because the folding and gluing machines generally require relatively high volumes (e.g., 150,000 units or more), it is necessary to accumulate the printed sheets from print runs until the necessary unit volume is reached. In order to keep track of individual print jobs, a marker is placed between each print job and the following print job. This can be accomplished, for example, by using a heavy, brightly colored cardboard sheet as the template, resulting in a brightly colored, sturdy marker at the top of each stack of printed items in a given order. The stacks of items can then be stacked and set aside, or transferred directly to the envelope folding and gluing machine and left there until there are a sufficient number of sheets to operate the machine.

Other items that require post-processing, e.g., folders, are processed using appropriate cutting and post-forming techniques, which are well known.

Sorting and Shipping

After cutting is completed, an operator refers to simple instructions displayed by a terminal, indicating how to package the items. The instructions also indicate whether certain stacks of items should be set aside until a subsequent print run has been completed, e.g., if a customer has ordered both business cards and letterhead stationery.

Shipping labels will be printed automatically by a printer attached to one of the browser-based terminals, allowing the operator to easily label the packages for shipping. The labels will generally include a bar code to facilitate shipping using optical-reader based systems, e.g., as used by UPS and FedEx carriers. When these carriers are used, the information scanned in by the optical reader can be used by the web server host to track the location of a shipment and, if desired, to inform a customer of the location and/or status of the customer's order. After an order has been packed and labeled, the operator can simply drop it into a carrier's bin (e.g., a UPS bin) on site.

As discussed above, most customers will have pre-paid during ordering, while some corporate customers will have accounts with the web server host, allowing invoicing and later payment. Debiting and invoicing of customers is conducted by the backend server upon receipt of a meta file from the printing facility indicating that
5 orders have been successfully shipped.

The printing facility and carrier are paid by an automated accounts payable management system after printing and shipping have been successfully completed.

System Scalability

10 Referring to Fig. 7, while a single web server is shown in Fig. 1 for clarity, the system will generally include more than one web server to accommodate a very large volume of users. For example, for volumes of up to around 2 million visits a month, the browser-based processing of the system allows for a small, dedicated print-processing server farm of fewer than 5 servers. The system may be scaled to
15 accommodate many times this amount of visits simply by adding more servers.

The servers are arranged in a "web server farm", i.e., all of the servers used are strictly identical, and the system architecture is implemented so that additional customer requests, that cannot be handled by the existing servers, can be handled by simply adding an extra identical server to the farm. The backend printing servers 28
20 are also arranged in a farm configuration.

In a farm configuration, the load is split between the available servers, so that if more servers are needed either due to overloading of the system or due to a server breaking down the load will continue to be split proportionally among the servers after one is added, removed or replaced.

Automated Bidding Exchange for Printing Services

25 As shown in Fig. 1, the web server host has supplier relationships with a number of printing firms that are equipped to receive digital data (layouts) and informational data (meta files) from the system servers. The system includes a program
30 that includes a digital database containing the meta files for each layout. The program fills customer orders by purchasing printing services based on automated real time bidding of commodity costs (i.e., paper and ink costs and/or depreciation). The printing firms bid for near-term printing services based on the capacity utilization of the

printer at the time the printing services are needed, by accessing certain parts of the program via the Internet. For instance, if a printing firm anticipates a near-term situation of unused capacity, the printing firm will generally price that time period at just above marginal (commodity) cost. The program selects the most attractive bid
5 from among the printing firms and transmits the digital data to that firm. The directing and redirecting of capacity can be done up to the very moment of production release.

The program may be configured to award a printing contract to the printing firm that is the lowest bidder, or to award the contract based on a group of selection criteria, e.g., quality, lead time, price, and history.

10 The printing firms may enter into the bidding process through a website operated by the web server host, e.g., by posting information regarding one-time availability, by posting information regarding long term availability (e.g., that a certain time slot is available every day or each week), or by responding to information regarding layouts that has been posted by the web server host. In some
15 implementations the web site is configured so that a printer will only see information pertaining to layouts that could be printed by that printer (i.e., the printer will not see information pertaining to layouts that are in a format that is larger than the format the printer's press can accommodate.)

In some cases, the bidding process will be bypassed entirely. For example, if
20 the web server has a layout that is particularly suitable for a specific printing firm, and the web server knows that the printing firm is available to print the layout, the web server may send the layout and meta files to the printing firm without putting the layout up for bidding by other firms.

Implementations of the invention involve a division of the characteristics (and
25 especially the costs) of the printing product into two major groups: the commodity aspects and costs; and the informational (or custom) aspects and costs.

The commodity aspects and costs are those that are deliberately forced to be non-varying among all of the print jobs. These include papers, inks and depreciation. Only a relatively small set of different papers may be permitted which reduces the cost
30 of the paper to a bare minimum. Only standard process inks may be permitted, which similarly reduces ink costs to a bare minimum. Finally, printing equipment costs (including depreciation expense) are also in the nature of a commodity across the many jobs that are to be printed. The goal is to reduce these costs to the bare minimum that

would be achieved were the presses to be run at full capacity and with zero setup time. The costs are driven toward this result by using techniques that reduce the setup time to a bare minimum and give the printer equipment owners a medium for easily filling essentially all of their unused capacity.

- 5 On the informational (custom) side are such aspects as definition of content of each print job, price, delivery, and other terms, the ability to reduce capacity underutilization, color definition and verification, variations in quantity, the details of delivery and invoicing, the details of change over and setup, and marketing and sales efforts. On this informational side, too, the goal of the implementations is to drive the
- 10 costs down (in theory to near zero) using information technology, electronic communication, and other techniques.

- Other embodiments are within the scope of the claims. For example, while fixed and variable fields are discussed above in the context of customer-defined
- 15 templates, in some implementations the web server host may provide templates having this feature as part of the website studio.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method comprising
accumulating discrete print jobs electronically from respective customers,
aggregating the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the
5 aggregate print jobs being printable at one time on units of an integral print medium,
and
electronically distributing the aggregate print jobs to respective printers for
printing.
2. The method of claim 1 in which the integral print medium comprises cut
10 sheets of paper.
3. The method of claim 1 in which the integral print medium comprises
large rolls of paper designed for use on offset printing web presses.
4. The method of claim 1 in which the print jobs are accumulated through
web browsers.
- 15 5. The method of claim 1 in which the printing of the aggregate print jobs
is done during periods of otherwise unused capacity.
6. The method of claim 1 in which each of the discrete print jobs comprises
a run of fewer than 5,000 copies.
7. The method of claim 1 in which the printing is done on large-scale offset
20 full-color presses.
8. The method of claim 1 in which the aggregating is done automatically.

9. A method comprising
defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying
positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to
be printed,
5 the print jobs being arranged on the grid so that at least at some different
positions along each of the two dimensions of the grid are print jobs that have different
content to be printed on the substrate,
printing the print jobs on the substrate at their respective positions defined by
the grid,
10 cutting the substrate to separate the print jobs, and
distributing at least some of the separated print jobs to different customer
locations.
10. The method of claim 9 in which the print jobs are of different formats.
11. The method of claim 9 in which all of the print jobs are printed on the
15 substrate at one time.
12. A method comprising
defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying
positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to cut sheets of a
substrate to be printed,
20 printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined
by the grid, and
cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate
the print jobs into rectangular stacks.
13. The method of claim 12 wherein each stack defines a separate print job.
- 25

14. A method comprising
defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying
positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a non-
preprinted substrate to be printed,
5 printing the print jobs on each of the sheets at their respective positions defined
by the grid, and
cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate
the print jobs.
15. A method comprising
10 defining a two-dimensional grid of discrete print jobs, the print jobs occupying
positions along the two dimensions of the grid, the grid corresponding to a substrate to
be printed,
printing the print jobs in full color on each of the sheets at their respective
positions defined by the grid, and
15 cutting the sheets of the substrate along each of the two dimensions to separate
the print jobs.
16. A method comprising
receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers, each of the orders being
received at an associated ordering time, each of the orders having an associated
20 delivery time, the periods between the ordering times and the delivery times of at least
some of the print jobs being different,
aggregating a set of the print jobs that have essentially the same associated
delivery time into an aggregate print job to be printed at one time on shared substrate
units, and
25 arranging for the production of the aggregate print job at a time that is just
ahead of the delivery time.
17. The method of claim 16 also including
adjusting the prices of the discrete print jobs based on the period between the
ordering time and the delivery time.

18. The method of claim 16 also including
arranging for the production during periods of unused printing capacity.

19. A method comprising
offering the printing of discrete print jobs to customers in at least two different
5 service levels,
one of the service levels comprising printing the print jobs free for the
customers, another of the service levels comprising charging for the print jobs receiving
orders from customers for print jobs at selected service levels, and

10 aggregating a set of the print jobs for printing at one time on shared substrate
units.

20. The method of claim 19 in which the service levels are associated with
speed of turnaround.

21. The method of claim 19 in which the service levels are associated with
presence or absence of third-party advertising on the print job.

15 22. A method comprising
receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers,
electronically creating and accumulating non-commodity information associated
with each of the print jobs,
aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one
20 time on shared substrate units, and
arranging for the production of the aggregate print job using commodity
supplies and services including non-preprinted paper as the common substrate, and
commodity inks.

23. The method of claim 22 in which the arranging for production includes
25 locating printers having unused capacity suitable for the aggregate print job.

24. A method comprising
receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers,
automating the generation of non-commodity information associated with the
print jobs,
5 aggregating a set of the print jobs into an aggregate print job for printing at one
time on shared substrate units, and
arranging for production of the aggregate print job in accordance with the non-
commodity information.

25. The method of claim 24 in which the non-commodity information
10 includes at least one of content, approval service, price, delivery terms, color
verification services, quantity, and set up steps.

26. A method comprising
receiving orders for discrete print jobs from customers,
defining an aggregate print job comprising a set of the discrete print jobs for
15 printing at one time on shared substrate units, the aggregate print job having a delivery
time,
enabling printers having equipment not economically suitable for completing
individual ones of the discrete print jobs to bid competitively for the aggregate print job
up to a time just ahead of the delivery time, and
20 awarding the aggregate print job to one of the printers prior to the delivery time.

27. The method of claim 26 in which the enabling and awarding are done
electronically.

28. A method comprising
receiving information defining discrete print jobs each of which is alone
economically unfeasible for printing on high volume printing equipment,
aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs, each of the
5 aggregate printing jobs being configured for printing at one time on units of a common
substrate, the aggregate print jobs being economically feasible for printing on high
volume printing equipment,
each of the aggregate printing jobs having a defined delivery time,
making the aggregate print jobs available up to just before the delivery time, for
10 competitive bidding by printers having the high volume printing equipment, and
awarding each of the aggregate print jobs to the printer with the most
competitive bid based on predetermined criteria.

29. A method comprising
using a high volume printing machine to produce high volume print jobs, each
15 of the high volume print jobs comprising printing of only a large number of identical
images one after the other,
determining the availability, between high volumes print jobs, of unused
printing capacity,
bidding for aggregate print jobs that can be produced economically on the high
20 volume printing machine using the unused printing capacity, each of the aggregate print
jobs comprising an aggregation of discrete print jobs that would be economically
unfeasible to print separately using the printing machine, and
printing at least one of the aggregate print jobs.

30. A method comprising
25 performing graphic design of a discrete print job on a design application that
runs on a web browser,
transferring the print job to a web server for storage after the graphic design is
performed,
modifying the print job on the web browser, and
30 updating the print job on the web server after the modifying is done.

31. A method comprising
aggregating discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs to be produced on units
of a common substrate, all of the aggregate print jobs conforming to a standard format,
transmitting the aggregate print jobs to a printer electronically, and
5 at the printer, configuring printing equipment for producing different ones of the
aggregate print jobs using the same steps.

32. A method comprising
defining a standard template format for containing common graphical
information that relates to different discrete print jobs,
10 providing a design tool to enable a designer to create a template that complies
with the standard template format and embodies the common graphical information,
enabling the designer to deliver the template to a server electronically,
enabling users at client machines to use the template to generate different
discrete print jobs that conform to the template and include custom graphical
15 information specific to each of the discrete print jobs, and
aggregating sets of the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs for printing
at one time on units of shared substrate.

33. A method comprising
aggregating discrete high-quality full color print jobs into a single aggregate
20 print job,
printing the single aggregate print job using standard process colors and
standard un-pre-printed paper on high speed printing equipment, and
distributing the aggregate print jobs in electronic files.

34. A method comprising

digitally aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job to be printed at one time on units of a standard shared substrate, the aggregate print job being defined in a standard compressed prepress data format,

5 sending the aggregate print job to a workstation at a printing site,
at the printing site, Raster Image Processing the aggregate print job to create standard color separations,

using a computer-to-plate process to create plates based on the color separations,

10 loading the plates onto a high volume press in accordance with a standard predefined protocol,

loading units of the standard shared substrate onto the press,

printing the aggregate print job onto the standard shared substrate,

cutting apart the standard shared substrate units to separate the discrete print

15 jobs, and

forwarding the discrete print jobs to different customer destinations.

35. A method comprising

aggregating discrete print jobs into a digital aggregate print job to be printed at one time on units of a standard shared substrate, the placement of the discrete printing jobs within the aggregate print job being defined by a digital aggregation template that represents the locations of cuts that will be needed to separate the discrete print jobs from the aggregate print job,

placing a physical embodiment of the aggregation template on the units of the standard shared substrate, and

25 using the physical embodiment of the aggregation template as a guide to making cuts to separate the discrete print jobs.

36. The method of claim 35 in which the aggregate print job includes a plurality of aggregated sheets, and is identified by an identifier printed on each aggregated sheet within the aggregate print job.

37. The method of claim 35 wherein information printed on the aggregation template is used to automatically identify each discrete print job.

38. A method comprising
aggregating discrete print jobs into an aggregate print job,
5 printing the aggregate print job at a printing site,
separating the discrete print jobs by cutting apart the aggregate print jobs,
electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using
a print job identifier,
at the printing site placing the print jobs into shipment bins of a parcel carrier
10 that tracks shipments electronically using a shipment identifier,
associating the print job identifier with the parcel carrier's shipment identifier,
enabling customers of the discrete print jobs to track the progress of delivery of
their discrete print jobs electronically.

39. A method comprising
15 aggregating discrete print jobs of respective customers into an aggregate print
job,
printing the aggregate print job at a printing site,
separating the discrete print jobs by cutting apart the aggregate print jobs,
electronically identifying the discrete print jobs as having been completed using
20 a print job identifier,
shipping the discrete print jobs essentially as soon as they are printed, cut and
packaged,
electronically billing the customers in response to completion of the printing
and delivery of the discrete print jobs to a shipper for shipment.

25 40. A method comprising
printing an aggregate print job,
cutting the aggregate print job apart to form different discrete print jobs,
automatically printing shipping labels for shipping the different discrete print
jobs to different respective customers, and

applying the labels to the different discrete print jobs in accordance with identifiers on the labels.

41. A method comprising
- providing different kinds of entry ports into a print job execution system, each
- 5 of the entry ports enabling a user to create interactively a full color print job in accordance with a pre-defined design template,
- at each of the ports, generating a digital print job file based on the design template and design input of the user, all of the print job files being expressed in a standard design data format,
- 10 routing all of the digital print job files electronically to an aggregation system, at the aggregation system, assembling selected ones of the digital print job files into aggregate print jobs, all of the aggregate print jobs being expressed in a standard prepress format, and
- routing different ones of the aggregate print jobs electronically to different
- 15 printers for printing.

42. Apparatus comprising
- web browsers configured for interactive design by users of discrete print jobs,
- a central storage for information about the discrete print jobs that results from interaction with the users,
- 20 a scalable group of web servers that interact with the web browsers and with the central storage,
- a scalable group of printing servers configured to aggregate the discrete print jobs into aggregate print jobs and deliver the aggregate print jobs electronically to printers.

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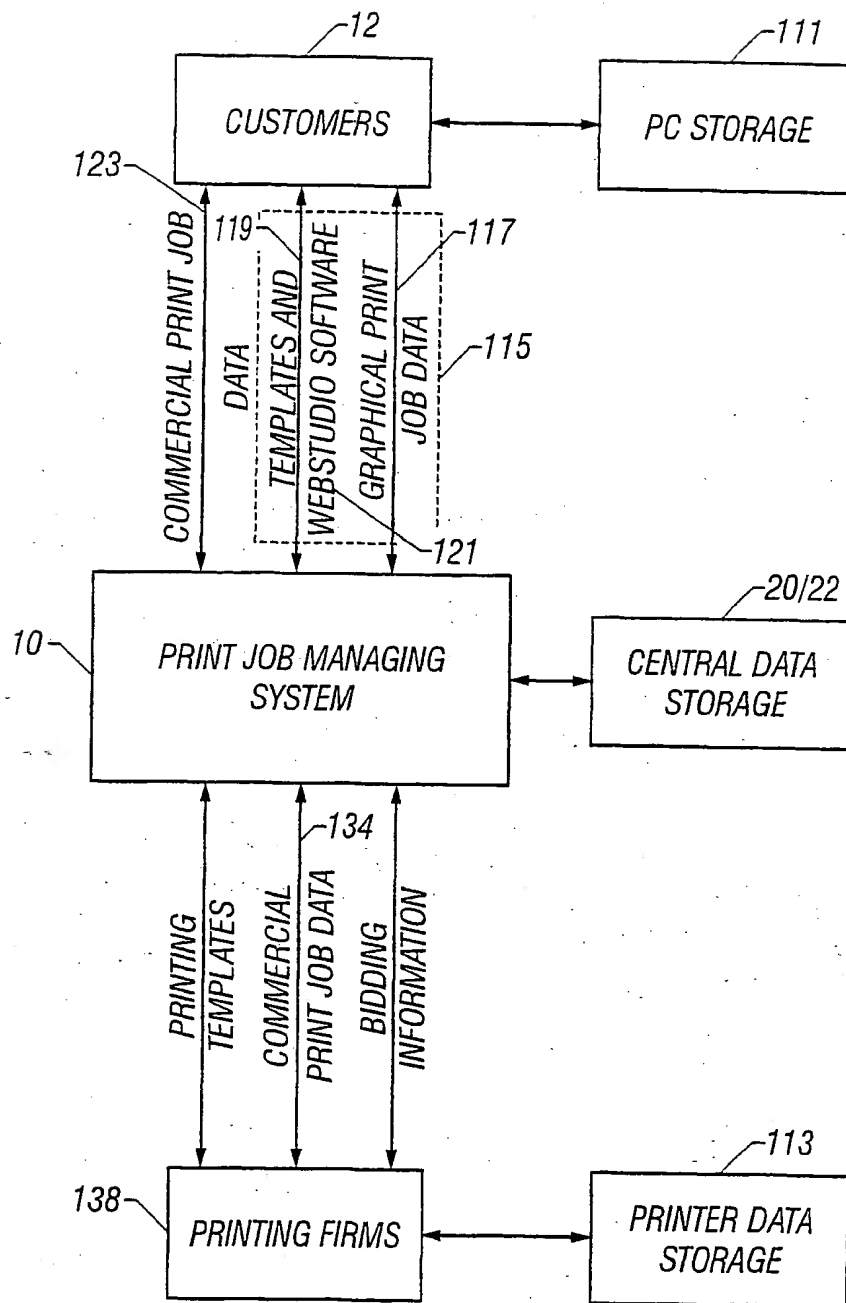


FIG. 1

SUBSTITUTE SHEET (RULE 26)

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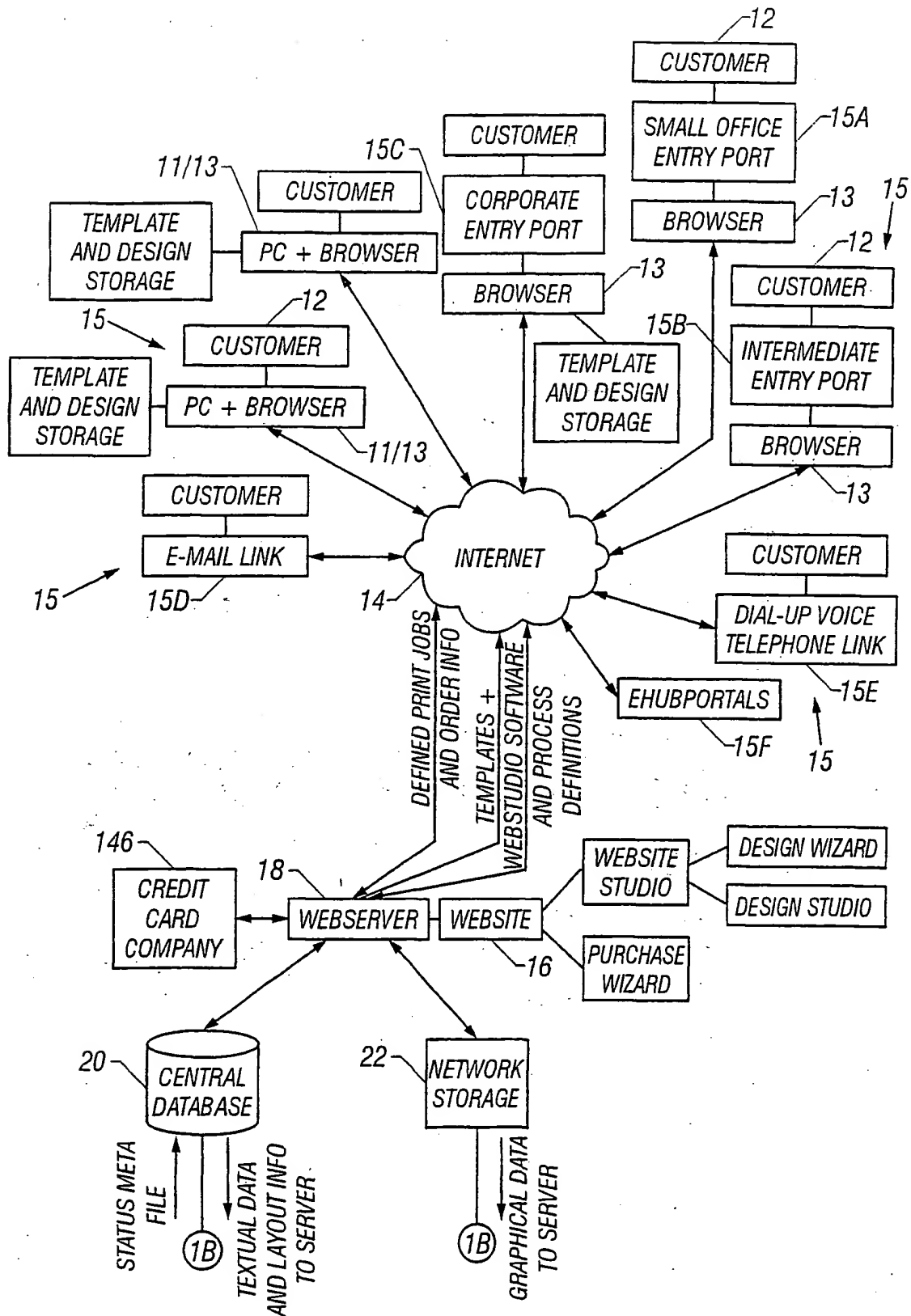


FIG. 1A

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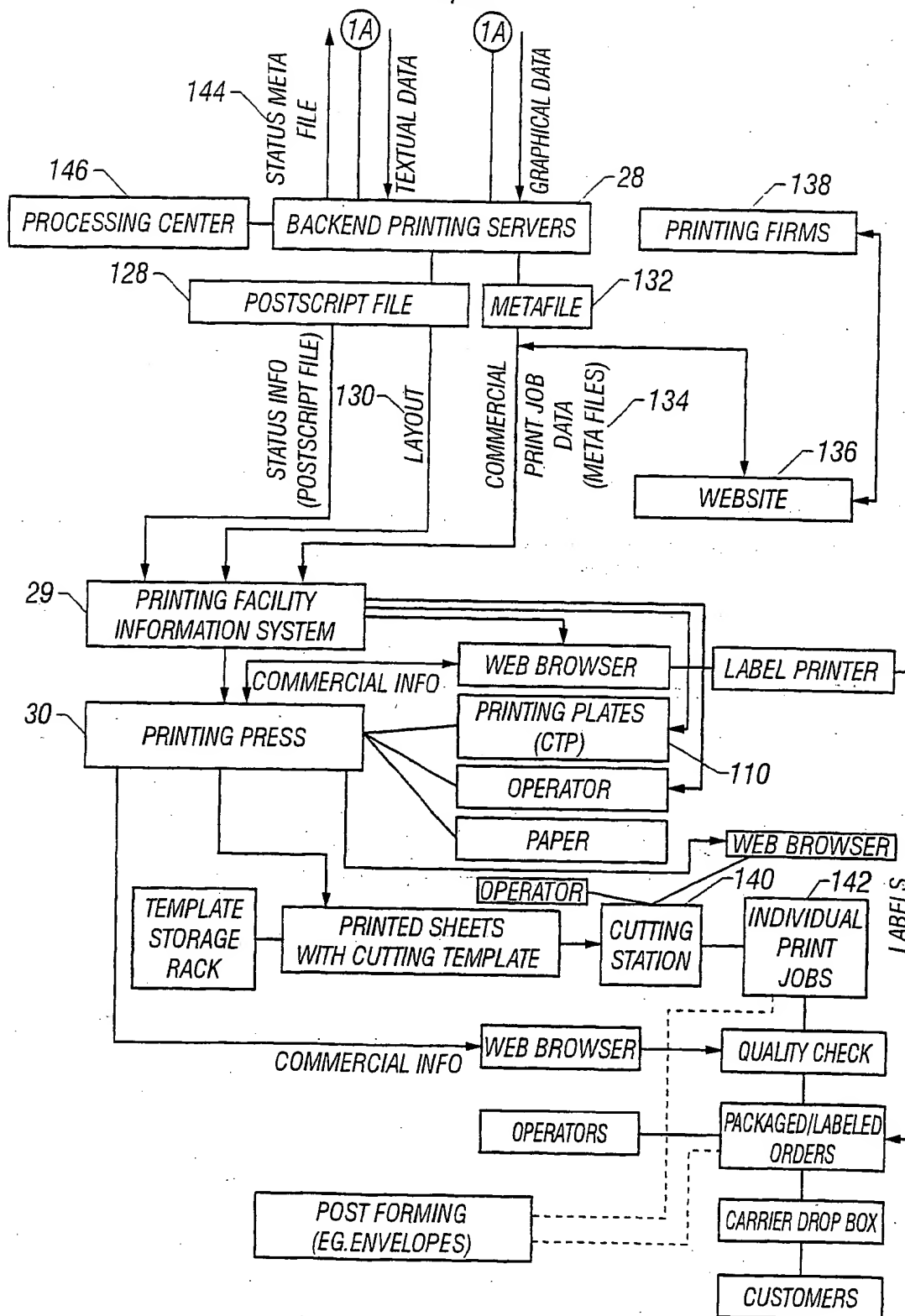


FIG. 1B

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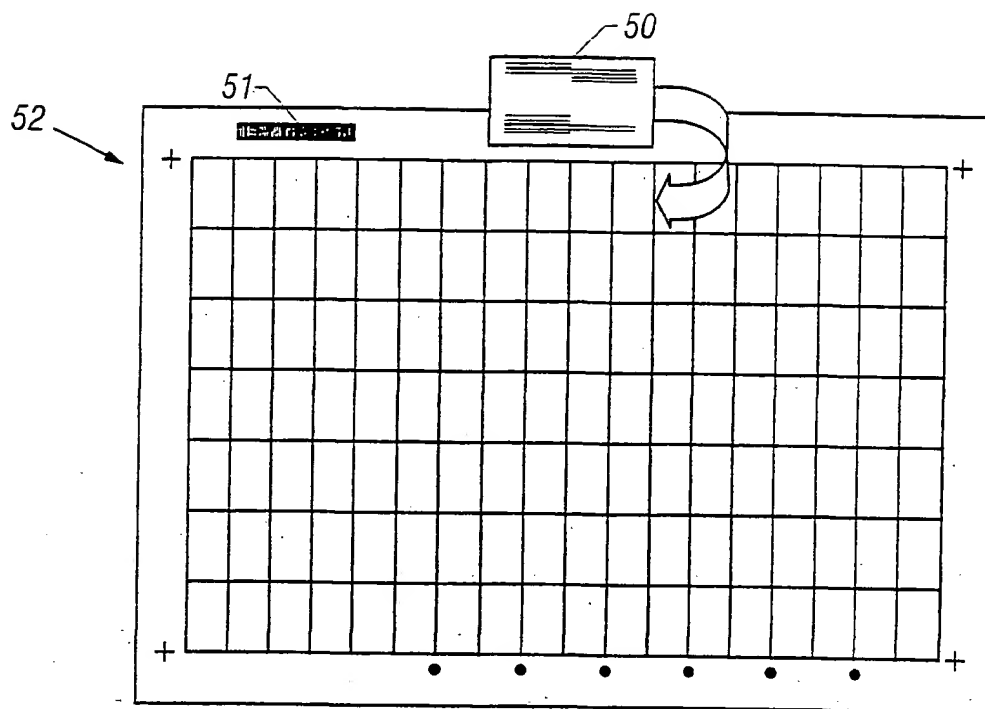


FIG. 2A

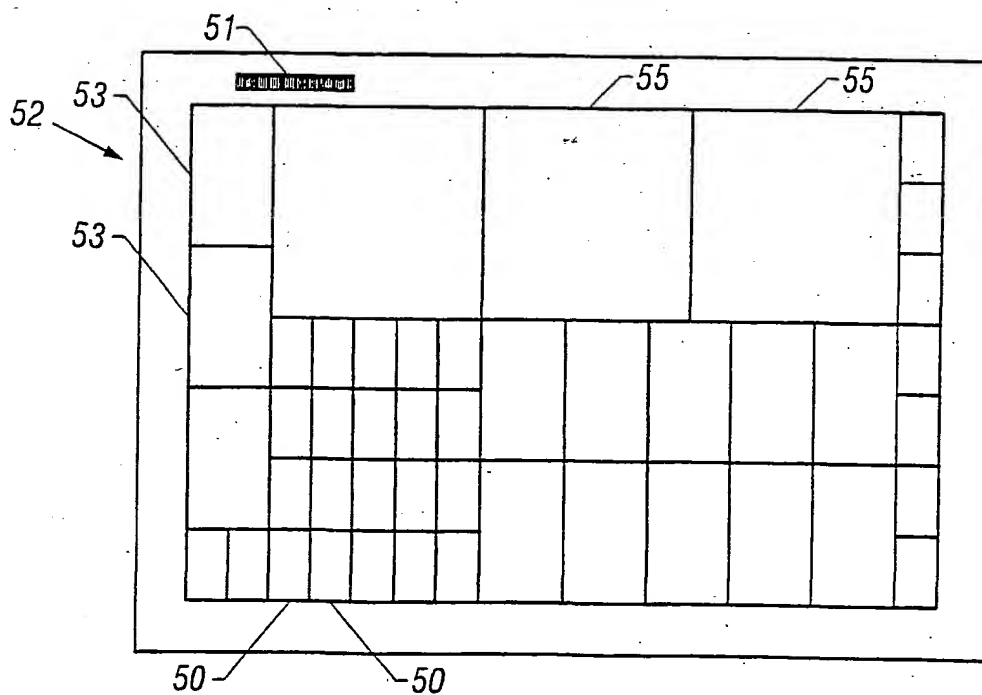


FIG. 2B

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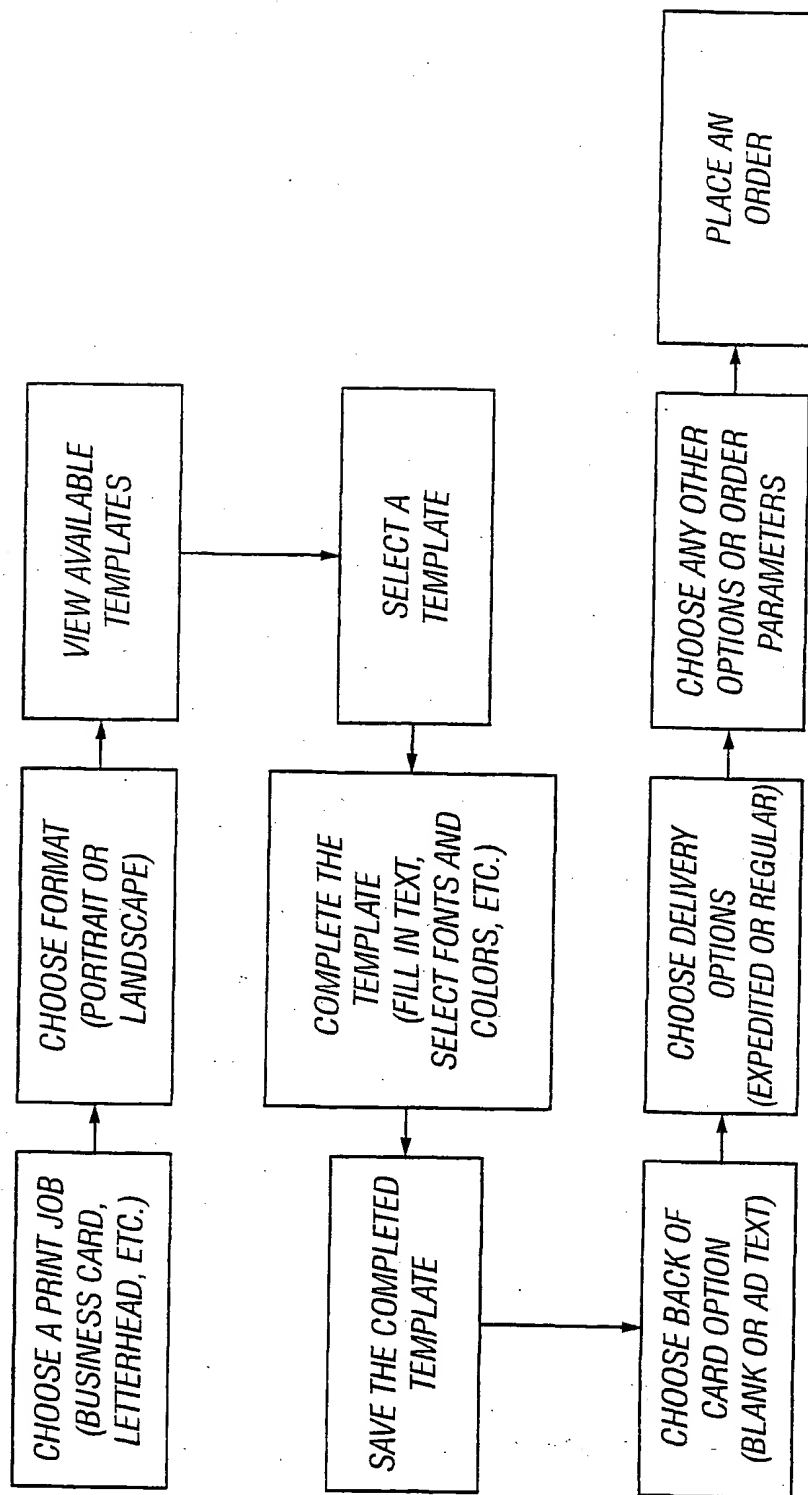


FIG. 3

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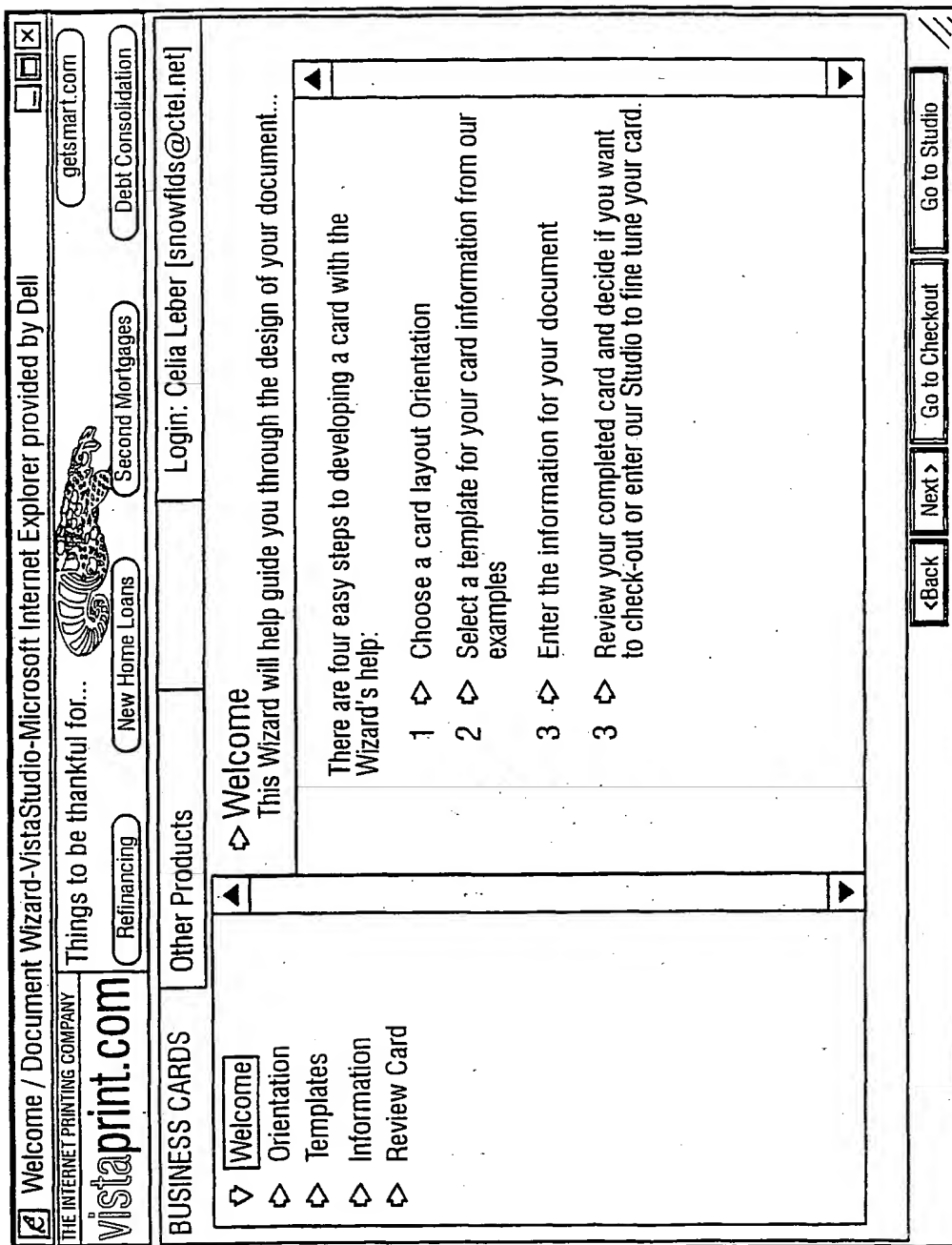


FIG. 4

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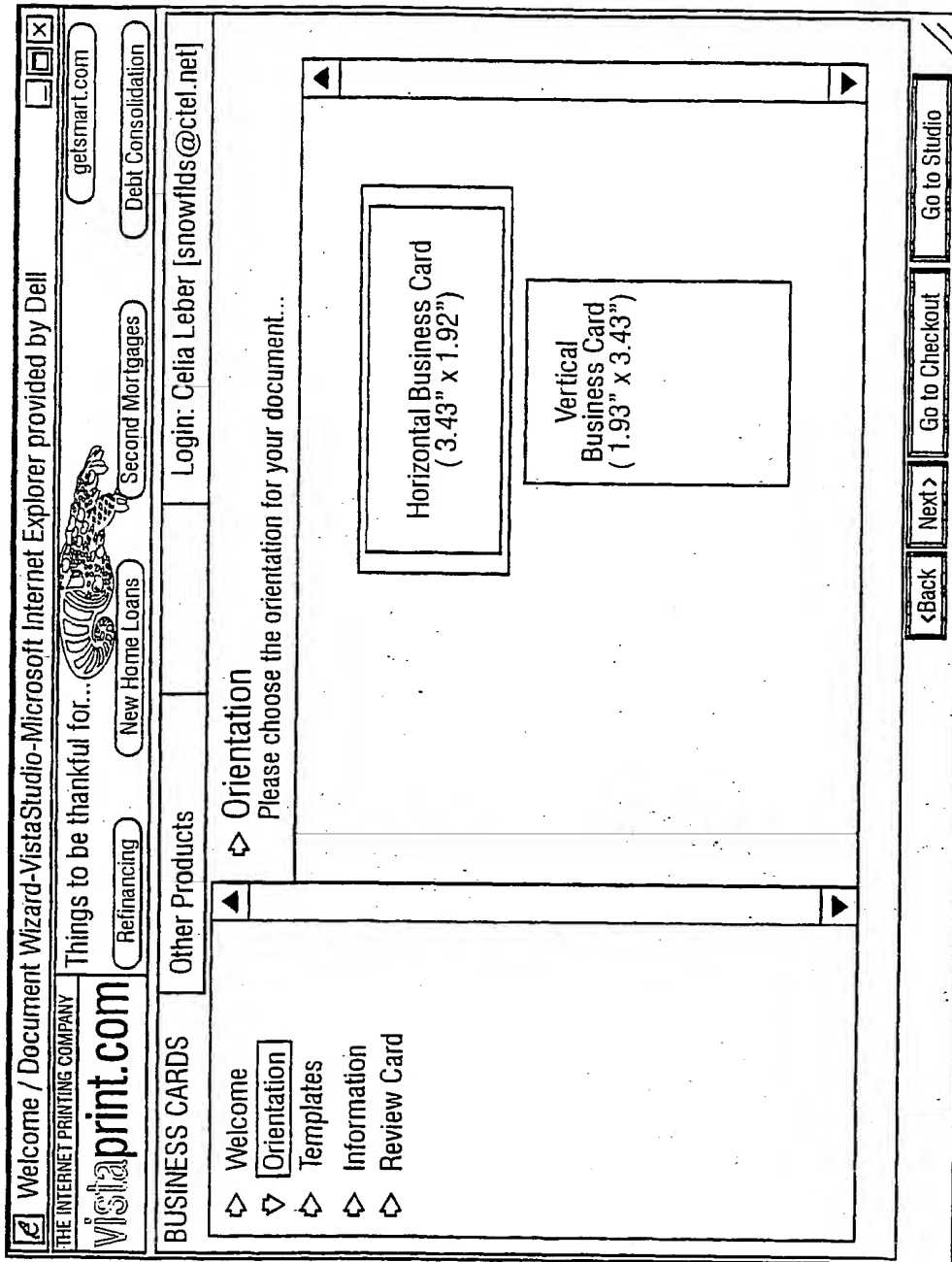


FIG. 4A

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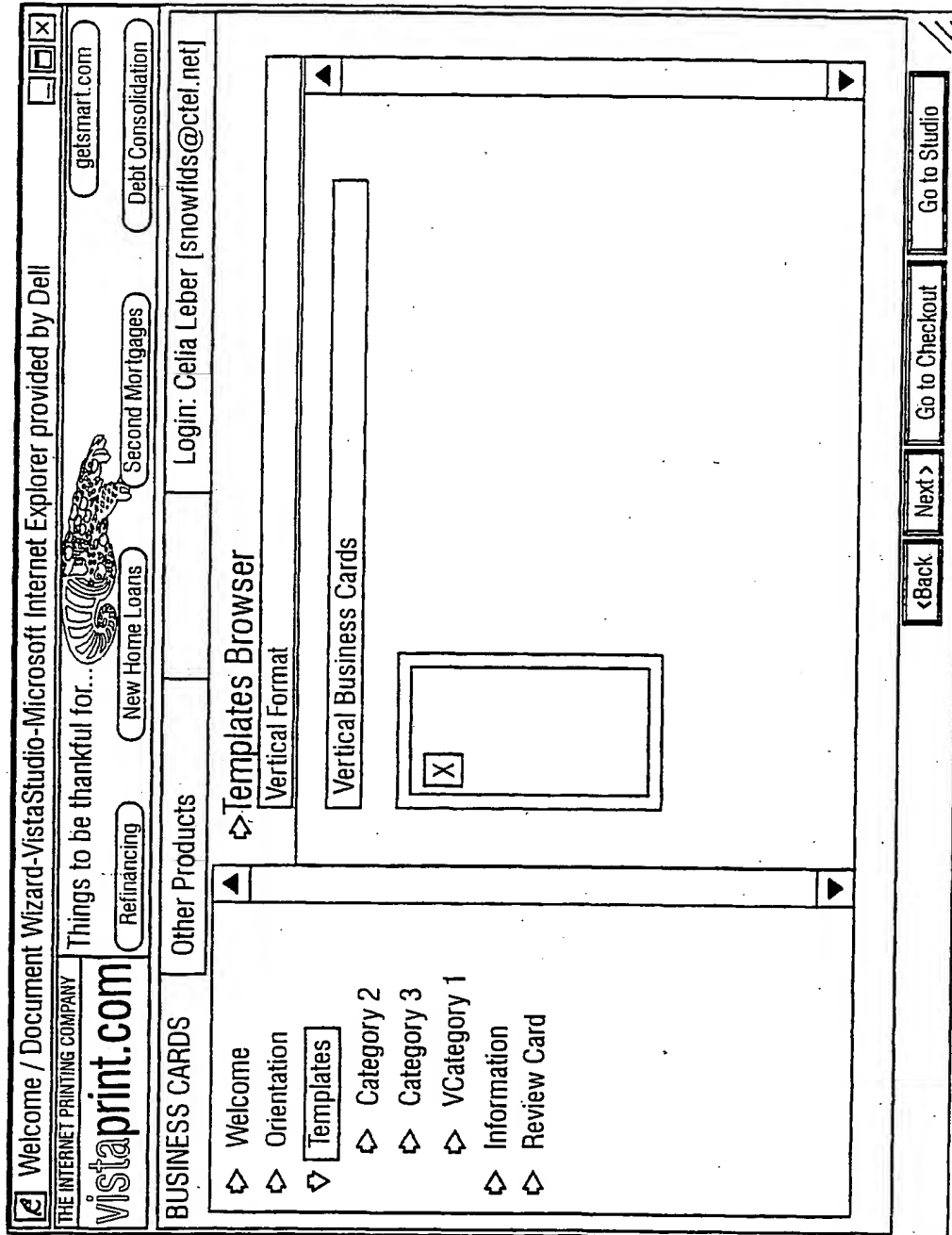



FIG. 4B

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Welcome / Document Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY
vistaprint.com

Things to be thankful for... 

Refinancing New Home Loans Second Mortgages Debt Consolidation

getsmart.com

BUSINESS CARDS

Other Products

Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@ctel.net]

Information
Please fill in this form with the information you want on your document...

Fill in document fields

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| Company Name | Your Company |
| Company message | Your Company Message |
| Name | Your Name |
| Job Title | Your Job Title |
| Address 1 | Address Line 1 |
| Address 2 | Address Line 2 |
| Address 3 | Address Line 3 |
| Phone | Tel: [xxx] yyy zzzz |
| Fax | Fax: [xxx] yyy zzzz |
| e-mail | e-mail: xxx@yourcompany.com |
| WebSite | WebSite: http://www.yourcompany.com |

Welcome
 Orientation
 Templates
Information
 Review Card


<Back Next> Go to Checkout Go to Studio

FIG. 4C

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Welcome / Document Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY
vistaprint.com

Things to be thankful for...  getsmart.com

Refinancing New Home Loans Second Mortgages Debt Consolidation

BUSINESS CARDS Other Products Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@octel.net]

Welcome
 Orientation
 Templates
 Information
 Review Card

Review Card
 Please review your document before proceeding to Studio or Check-out...

It was as easy as that! You have now laid out your document and you are ready to edit in VistaStudio™. Here is what your document will look like:

Your Company
Your Company message

Your Job Title
Tel: [xxx] yyy zzzz
Fax: [xxx] yyy zzzz

e-mail: xxx@yourcompany.com
WebSite: http://www.yourcompany.com

Address Line 1
Address Line 2
Address Line 3

Show other side

If you are not completely satisfied with that layout you may choose another template by navigating back in this wizard or apply further changes in the studio.

<Back Next > Go to Checkout Go to Studio

FIG. 4D

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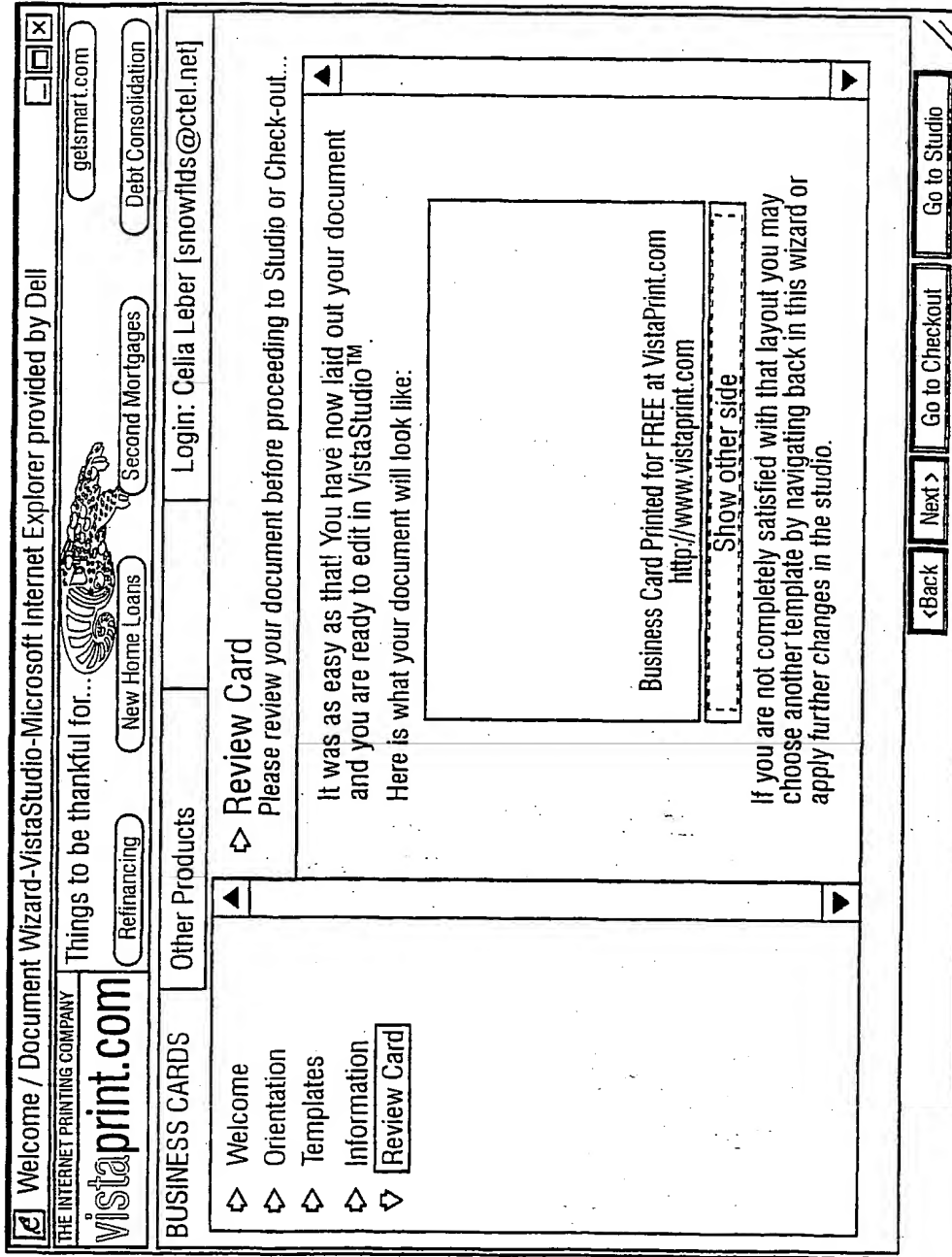


FIG. 4E

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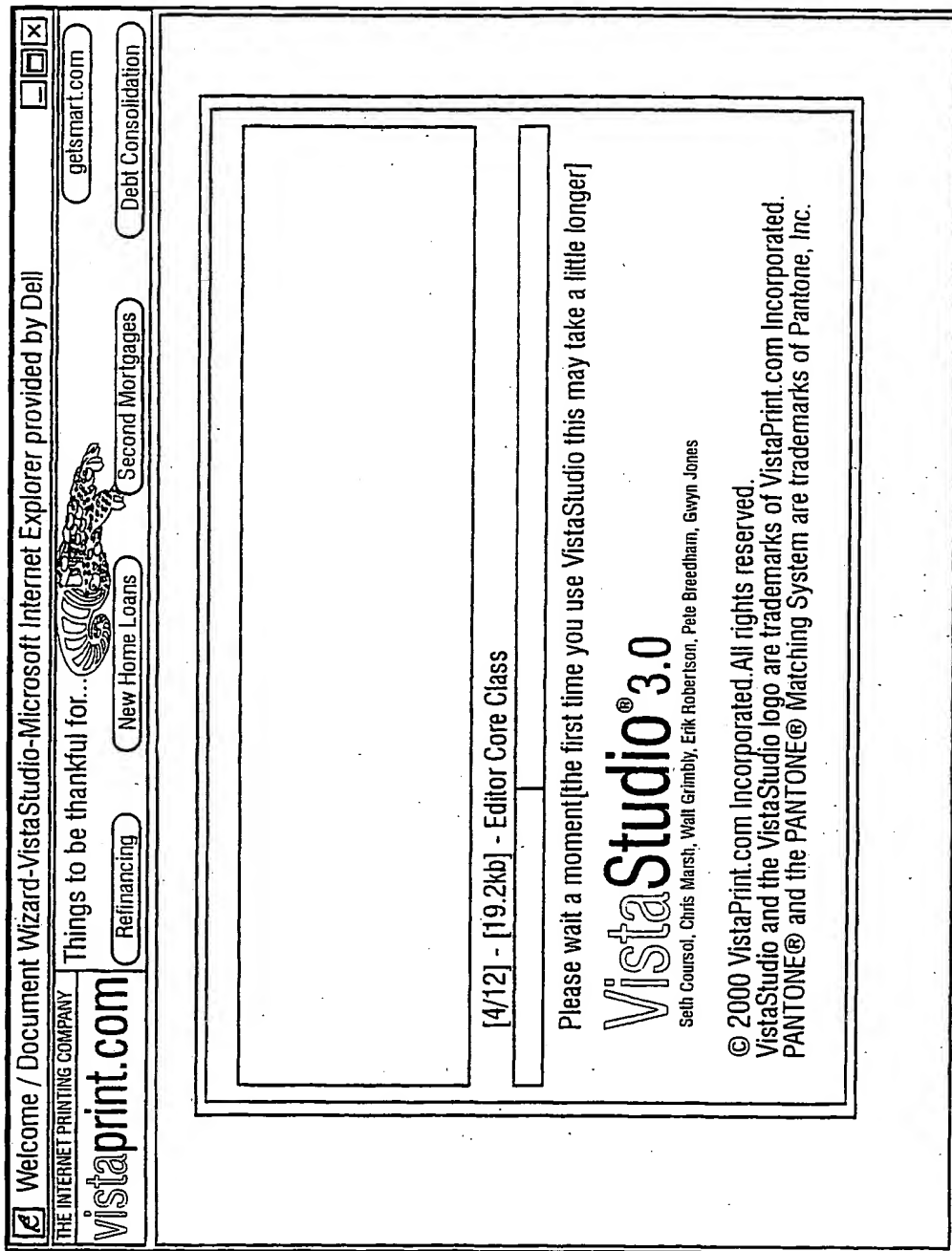


FIG. 4F

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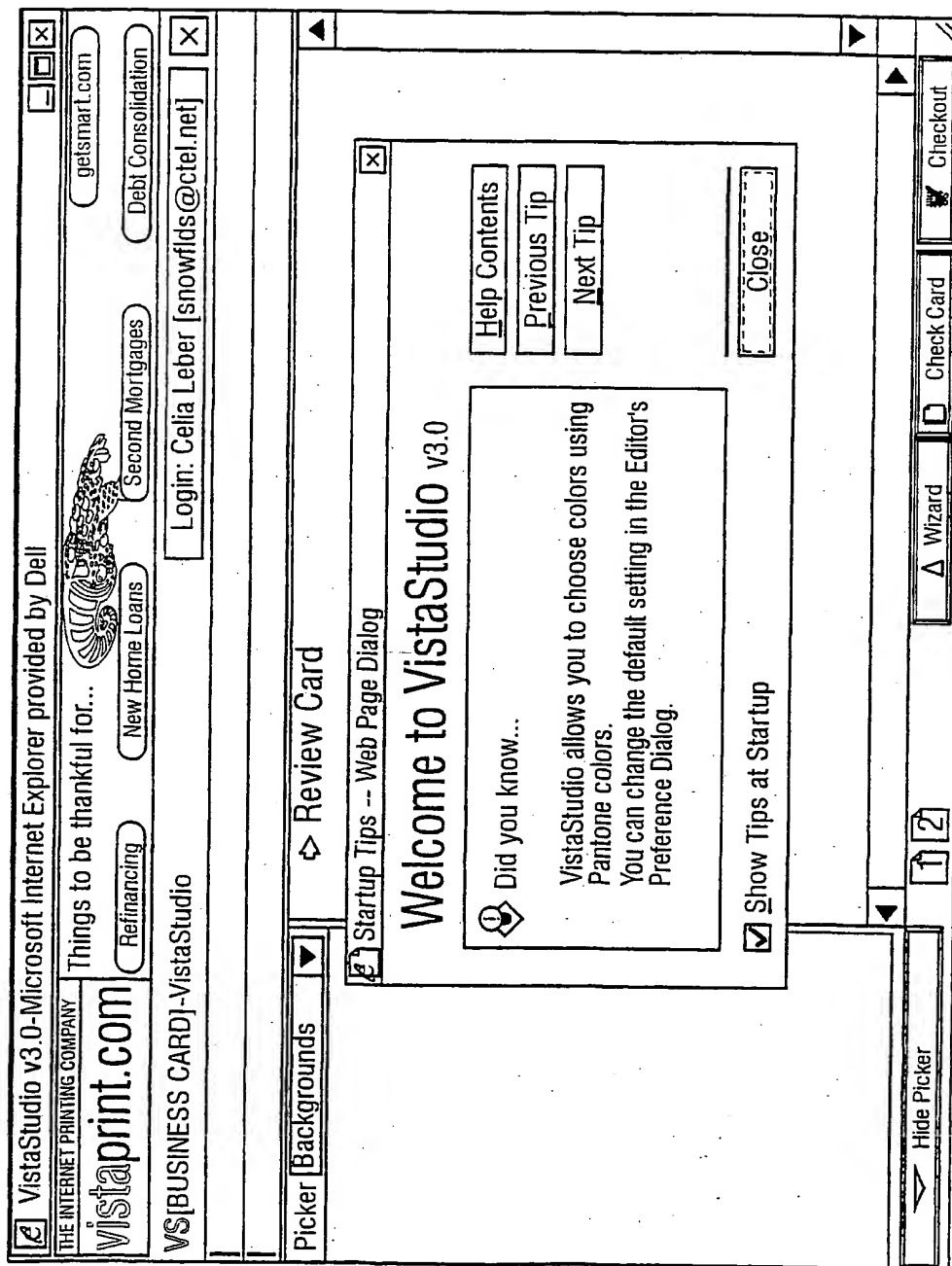


FIG. 4G

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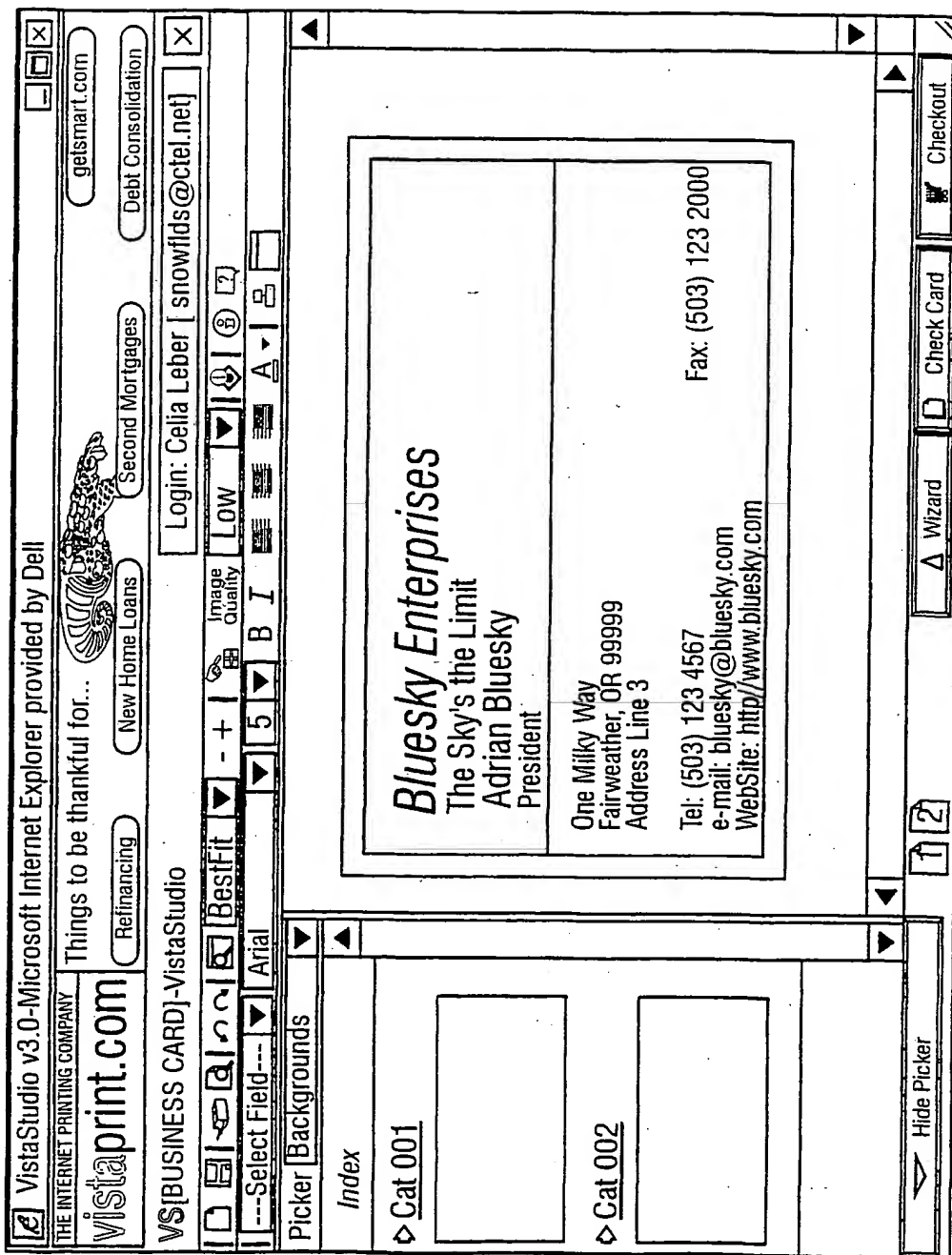


FIG. 4H

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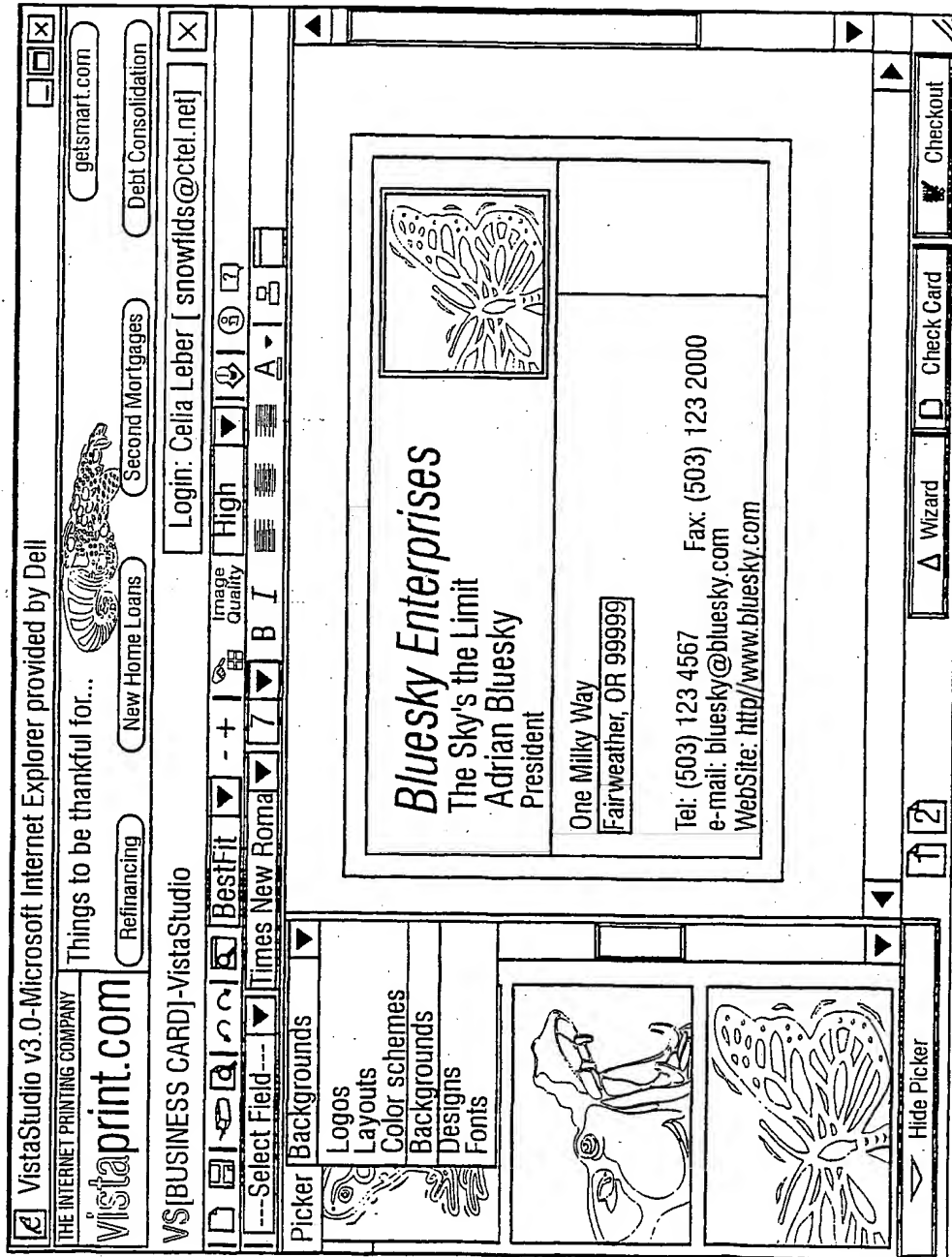


FIG. 4I

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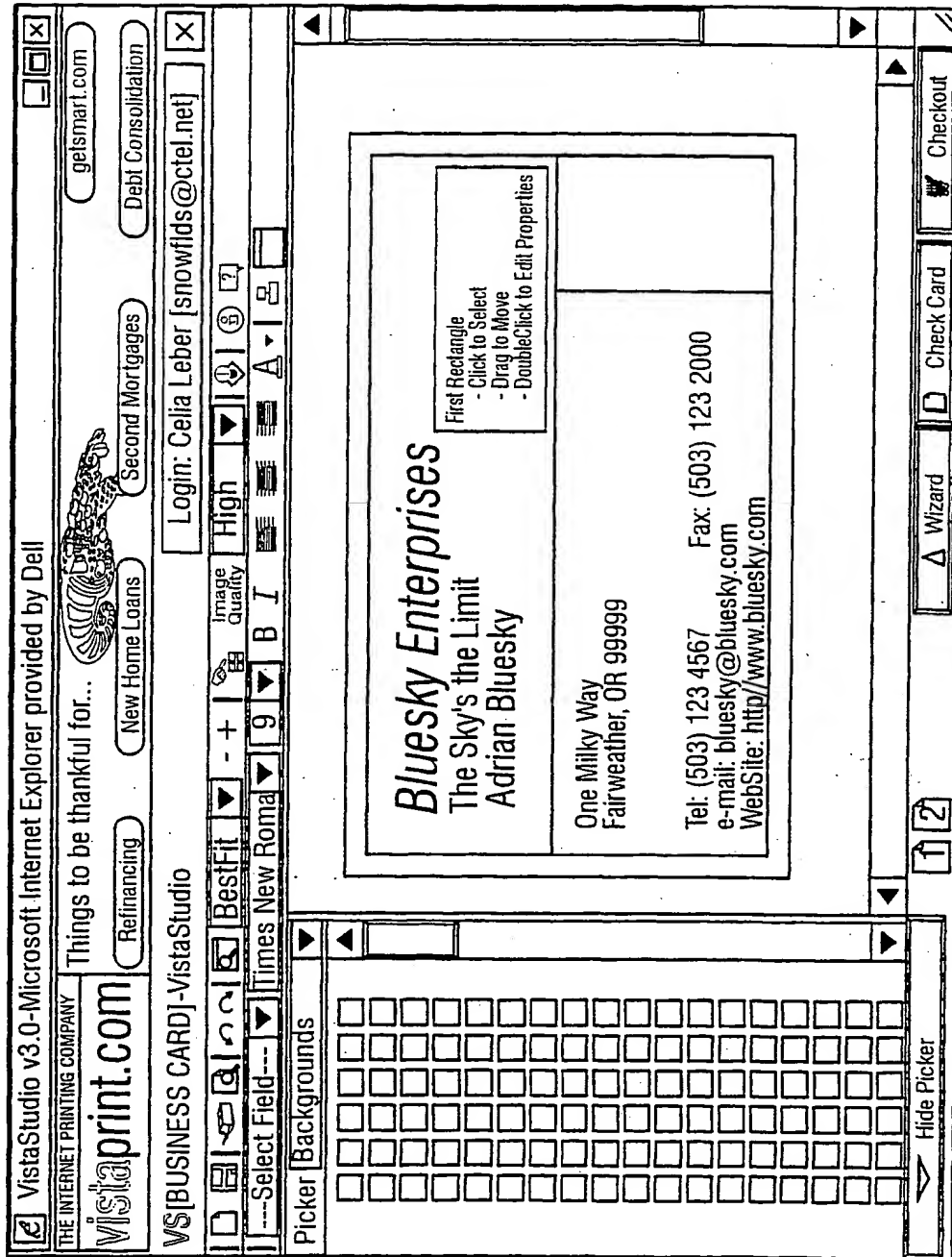


FIG. 4J

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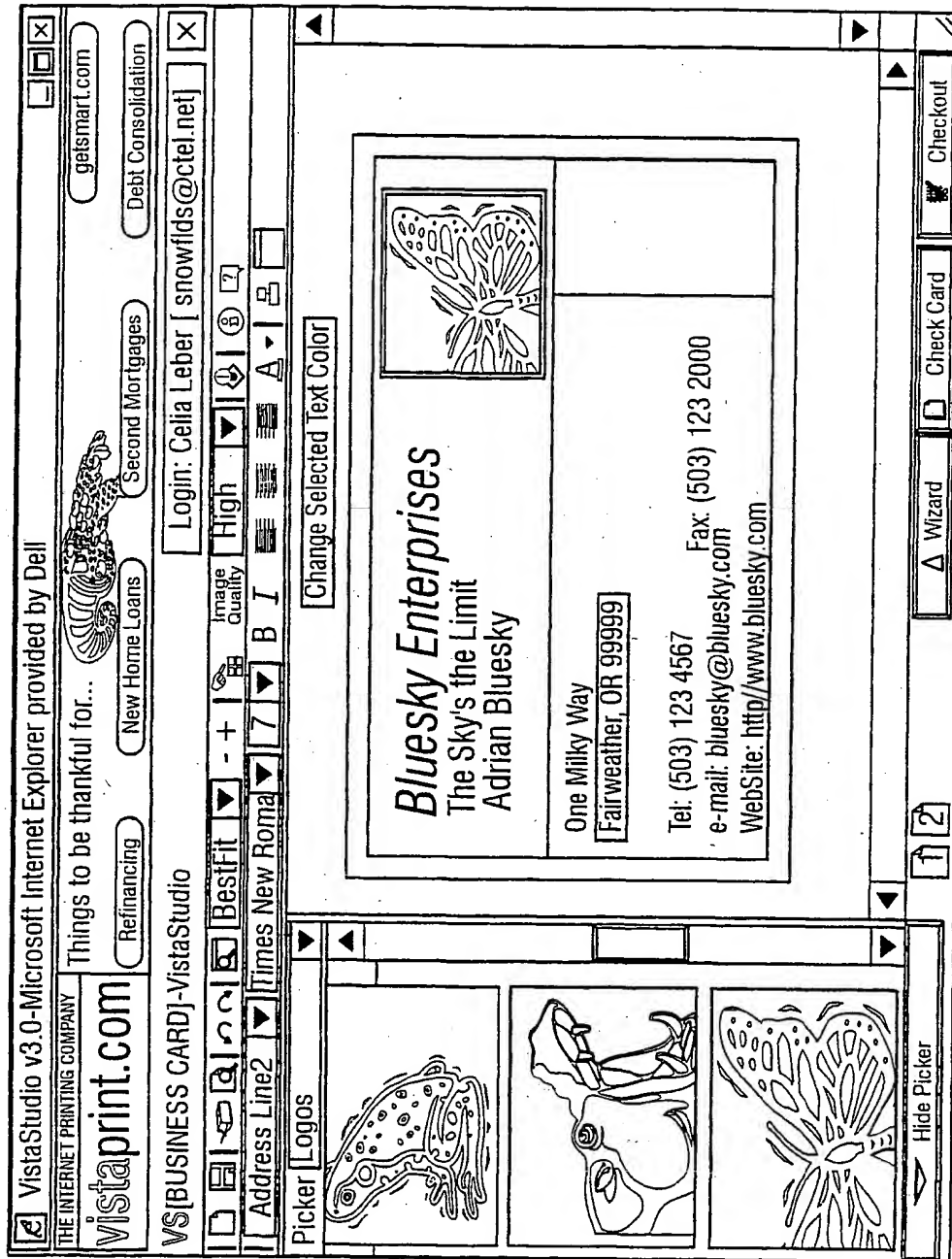


FIG. 4K

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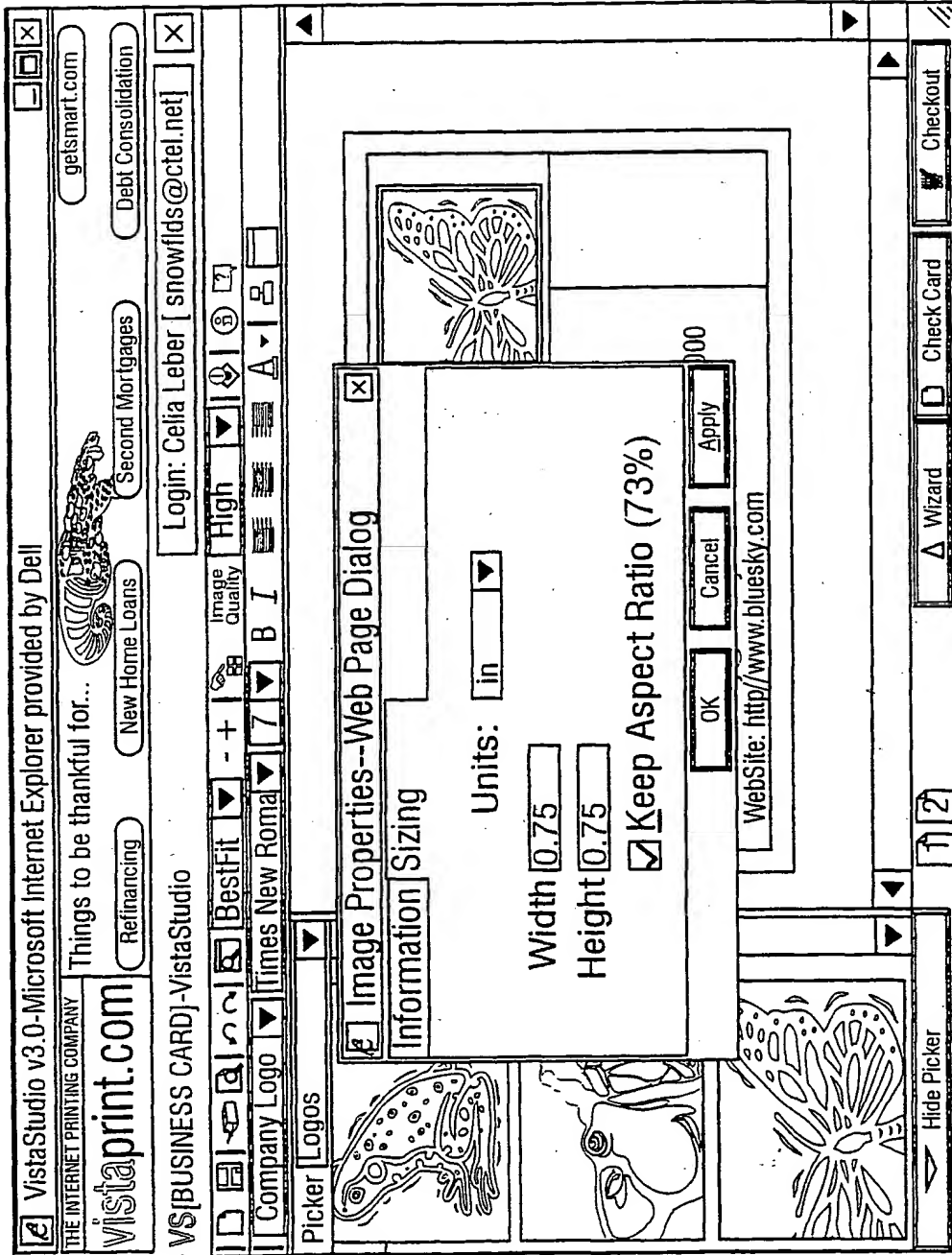


FIG. 4L

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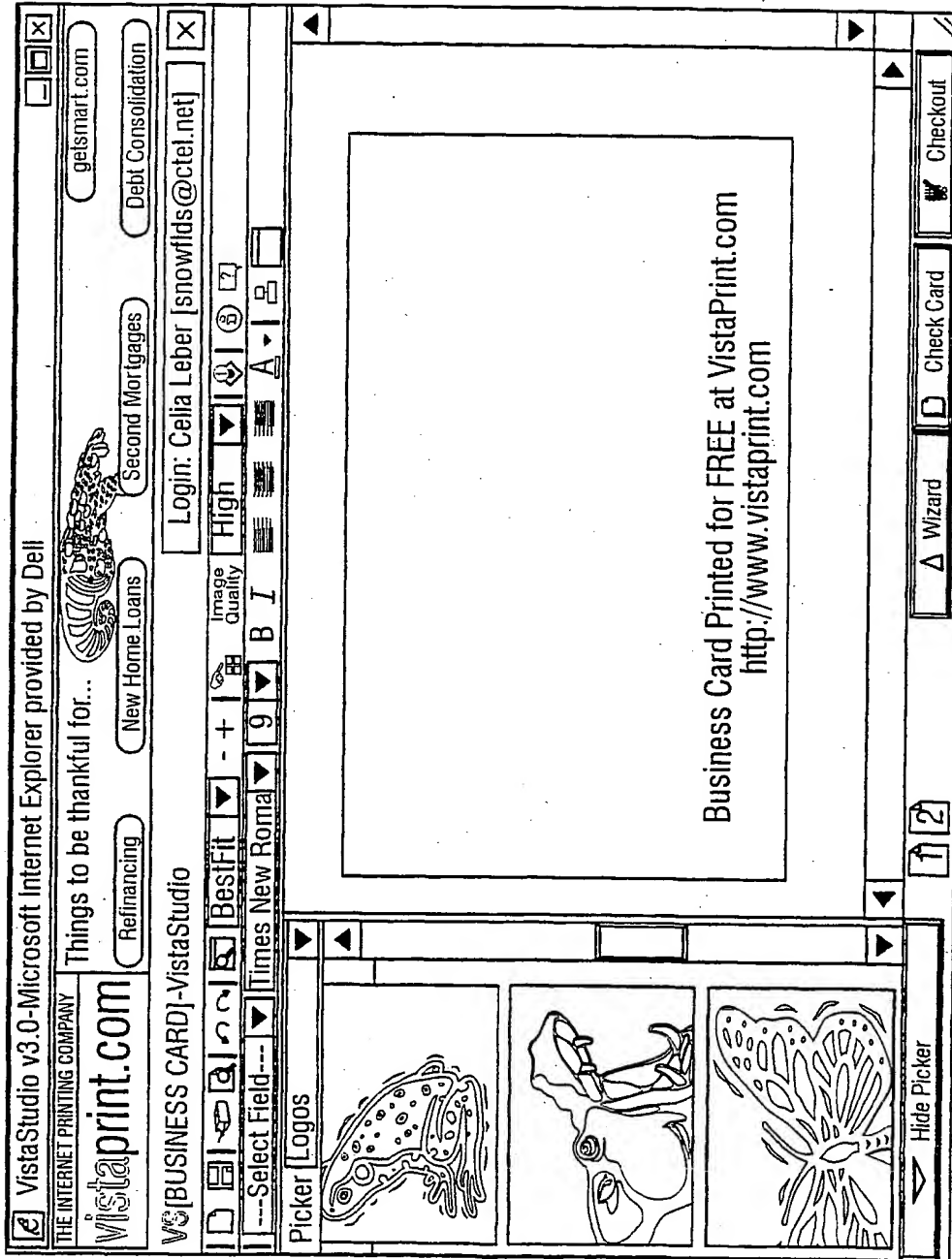


FIG. 4M

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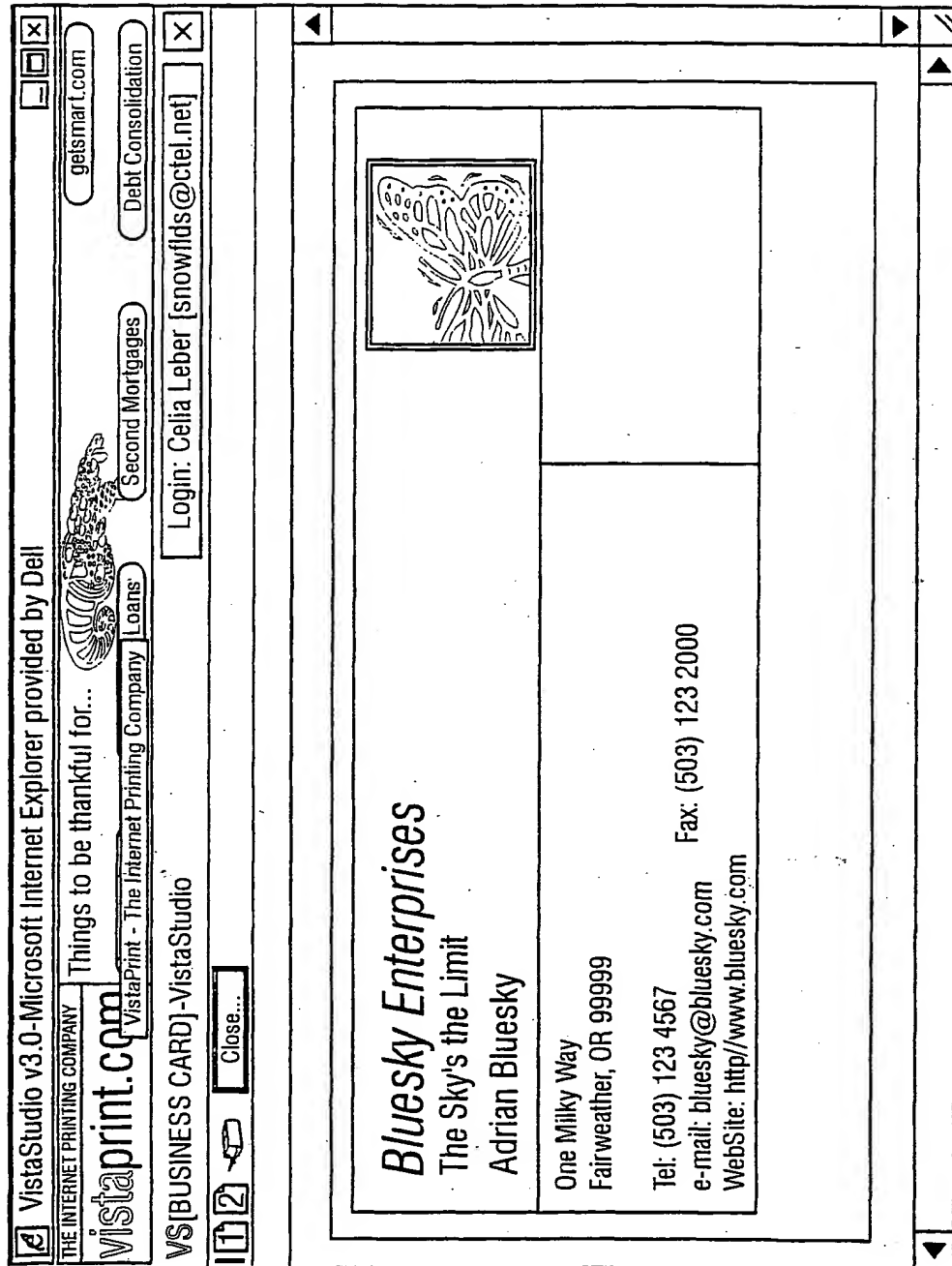


FIG. 4N

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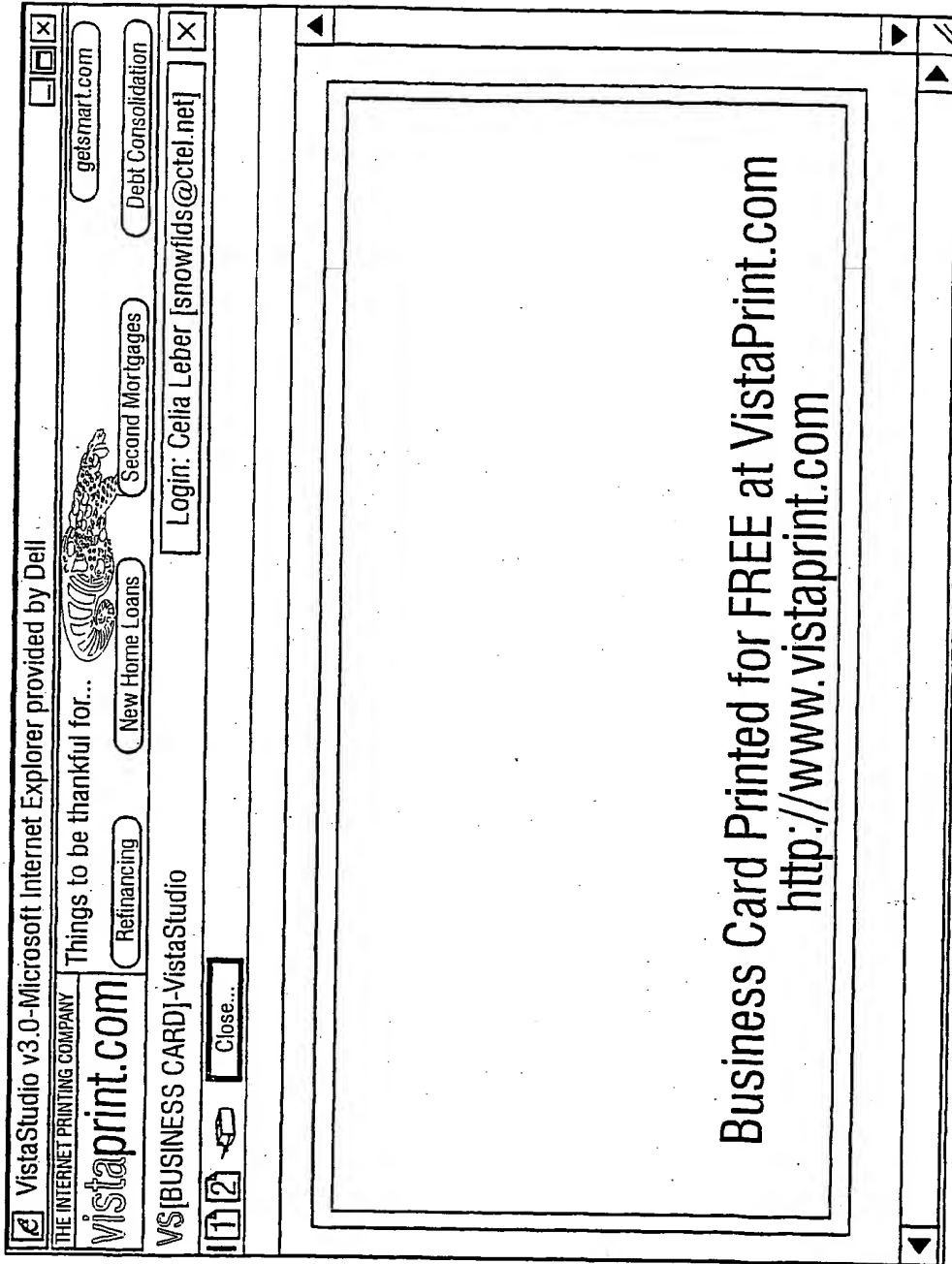


FIG. 40

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Welcome / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY
vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address I want 250 Options Delivery Billing Confirm
Full-Color Business Cards for Free

Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@ctel.net]

➤ Welcome
This Wizard will guide you through the Purchasing process ...

In advance we wish to thank you for your confidence in VistaPrint goods and services. You are currently hooked to a secure server. At VistaPrint.com we do everything so that your shopping experience stays completely secure and satisfying.

Here are the steps this wizard will guide you through:

- Review
Review your order, change quantity, edit item.
- Address
Type your shipping address.
- Options
Change order options.
- Delivery
Choose delivery options. Printing Priority and Shipping Method.
- Billing
Enter your billing information.
- Confirm
Check your pre-invoice and confirm your order. Your credit card is not charged until you reached and confirmed this step.

Secure Server Connection

<Back Next> Finish

FIG. 4P

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Review / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

Vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

I want 250 Full-Color Business Cards for Free

Ordering Information Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@ctel.net]

Review

Please review your document. If your not satisfied, you can edit it in the studio

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | Free |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | Free |
| SubTotal : | | Free |

Your Company

Your Company Message

Your Job Title
Tel: [xxx] yyz zzzz
Fax: [xxx] yyz zzzz

e-mail: xxx@yourcompany.com
WebSite: http://www.yourcompany.com

Address Line 1
Address Line 2
Address Line 3

Business Cards are FREE for EVER at VistaPrint.com
<http://www.vistaprint.com>

Secure Server Connection

FIG. 4Q

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Shipping Address / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

I want 250 Full-Color Business Cards for Free

Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@ctel.net]

Ordering Information

Address

Please fill in the following form with your shipping information

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | Free |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | Free |
| SubTotal: | | Free |

Shipping Address

Please note that ALL fields in this form are required

First Name: Adrian

Last Name: Bluesky

Street: One Milky Way

City: Fairweather

State (US Only): Oregon ZIP Code: 99999

Country: United States of America Phone: (503) 123-4567

Reset

Secure Server Connection

<Back Next > Finish

FIG. 4R

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Options: Blank Reverse / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

I want 250 Full-Color Business Cards for Free

Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@ctel.net]

Options: Blank Reverse Side

As part of this product order, VistaPrint.com proposes you use this specific option, See below for details.

| Name: | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | Free |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | Free |
| SubTotal: | | Free |

For promotional purposes, VistaPrint.com is advertising on the back of every business card we print "Free Business Cards at <http://www.vistaprint.com>"
So, on, so, on...
Option costs: \$8.00

☐ Please print my Business Cards with a blank reverse side.

Secure Server Connection

Back Next Finish

FIG. 4S

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Delivery: / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

I want 250 Full-Color Business Cards for Free

Ordering Information Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@ctel.net]

Delivery

Choose here your delivery options: Printing Priority and Shipping. See below for details

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | Free |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | Free |
| SubTotal : | | Free |
| Shipping and handling : | | \$3.50 |
| Total : | | \$3.50 |

Printing Priority

Your printing priority determines how fast your documents will be printed. Don't forget that the delivery time depends also on your shipping option.

Printing Time + Shipping Time = Delivery Time

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Standard 3 weeks printing | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | FREE More... | This is our usual printing time. Your order is queued along with all the orders we receive through the website. In a time frame of three weeks we guarantee that your documents will be printed. |
| Rush 1 week printing | <input type="radio"/> | \$7.99 More... | With this option, we list your order in a priority queue so we can ensure printing of your document within one week. |
| Super Rush 24 hour printing | <input type="radio"/> | \$23.99 More... | Your order is entered in a special queue for immediate processing. Your document will be printed during the day and shipped the next business day. |

Shipping

Your printing priority determines how fast your documents will be printed. Don't forget that the delivery time depends also on your shipping option.

Printing Time + Shipping Time = Delivery Time

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|--|
| Standard 3 to 7 business days | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | Varies More... | This is our usual printing time. Your order is queued along with all the orders we receive through the website. In a time frame of three weeks we guarantee that your documents will be printed. |
| Priority 2 to 4 business days | <input type="radio"/> | Varies More... | With this option, we list your order in a priority queue so we can ensure printing of your document within one week. |
| Second Day 2 business days | <input type="radio"/> | Varies More... | Your order is entered in a special queue for immediate processing. Your document will be printed during the day and shipped the next business day. |
| Overnight 1 business day | <input type="radio"/> | Varies More... | Your order is entered in a special queue for immediate processing. Your document will be printed during the day and shipped the next business day. |

Secure Server Connection

<Back Next > Finish

FIG. 4T

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Submitting Basket to Server / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY
vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address I want 250 Full-Color Business Cards for Free Confirm

Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowfls@ctel.net]

Submitting Basket to Server
Next step requires server computation... We are currently submitting your basket to the server for this. Please hold on.

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards | 250 | Free |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | 1 | Free |
| SubTotal : | | Free |

We are currently submitting your basket to the server, Please hold on...

Secure Server Connection

FIG. 4U

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| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Delivery: / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell | | <input type="checkbox"/> Shipping Information and Address / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell | |
| THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY vistaprint.com | | | |
| Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm | | | |
| I want | | 250 ▼ | Full-Color Business Cards for |
| | | | Free |
| Ordering Information | | Shipping Rates & Policies | Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowflds@ctel.net] |
| ◇ Billing Information and Address Please fill in the following form with your billing information. | | | |
| Name | | Qty | Total Price |
| 250 Business Cards | | 250 | Free |
| Full-Bleed Document Printing | | 1 | Free |
| | | SubTotal : | Free |
| | | Shipping and handling : | ? |
| | | Total : | \$3.50 |
| Billing Information Please note that ALL fields in this form are required. | | | |
| Name on Credit Card: Adrian Bluesky | | | |
| Credit Card number: | | Type: VISA ▼ | |
| Expiration Date: Mar ▼ | | 2000 ▼ | You will not be charged until final approval on next page |
| | | | |
| Billing Address Please note that ALL fields in this form are required. | | | |
| First Name: Adrian | | | |
| Last Name: Bluesky | | | |
| Street: One Milky Way | | | |
| City: Fairweather | | | |
| State (US only): Oregon ▼ | | ZIP Code: 99999 ▼ | |
| Country: United States of America ▼ | | Phone: (503) 123-4567 ▼ | |
| Secure Server Connection | | | |
| <Back | | Next > Finish | |

FIG. 4V

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Payment Confirmation: / Checkout Wizard-VistaStudio-Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by Dell

THE INTERNET PRINTING COMPANY

vistaprint.com

Welcome Review Address Options Delivery Billing Confirm

I want 250 Full-Color Business Cards for Free

Ordering Information Shipping Rates & Policies Have a question? Login: Celia Leber [snowflids@cstel.net]

► **Payment Confirmation**

Please review your order's details and confirm if satisfied by clicking the "Accept Order and Process" or "Finish" button

Ship To

Adrian Bluesky
One Milky Way
Fairweather, OR 99999
United States of America

Bill To

Adrian Bluesky
One Milky Way
Fairweather, OR 99999
United States of America

Your order will *not* be processed until you click here

| Name | Qty | Total Price |
|------------------------------------|-----|-------------|
| 250 Business Cards, <i>Unnamed</i> | 250 | \$0.00 |
| Sub Total : | | \$0.00 |
| Shipping and Handling : | | \$3.50 |
| Tax : | | \$0.00 |
| Total : | | \$3.50 |

Secure Server Connection

FIG. 4W

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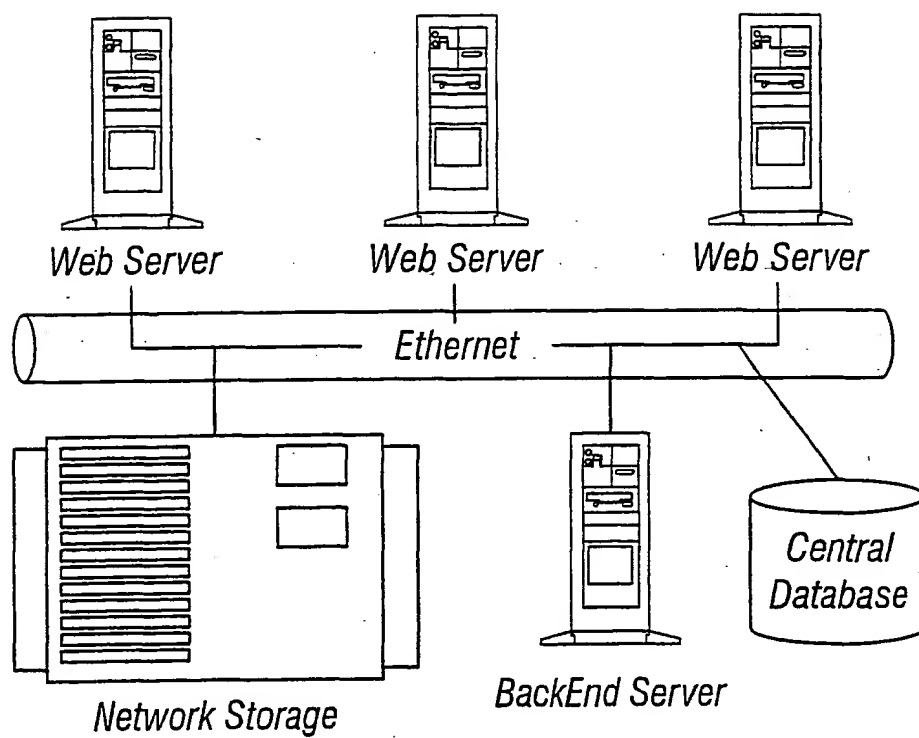


FIG. 5

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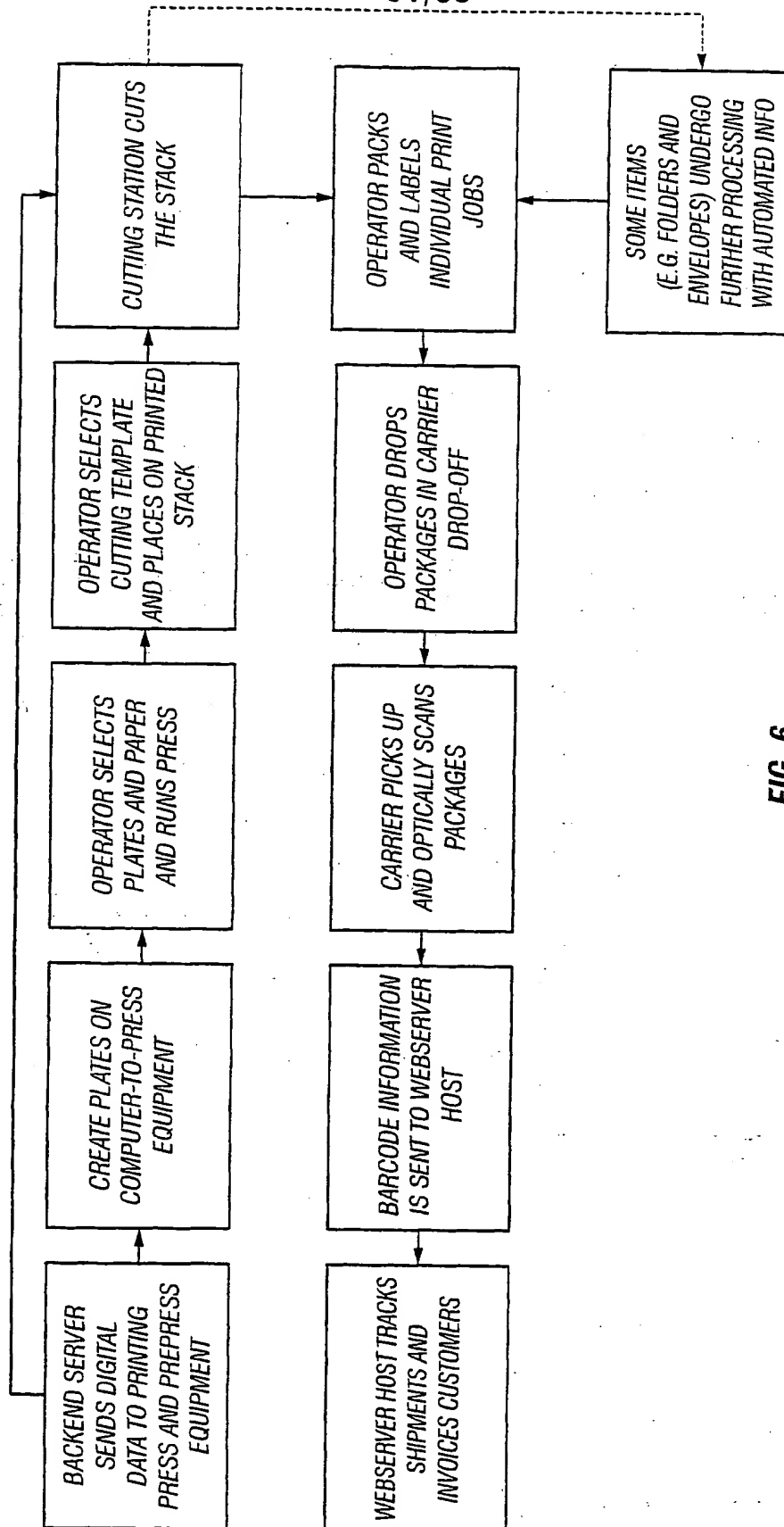


FIG. 6

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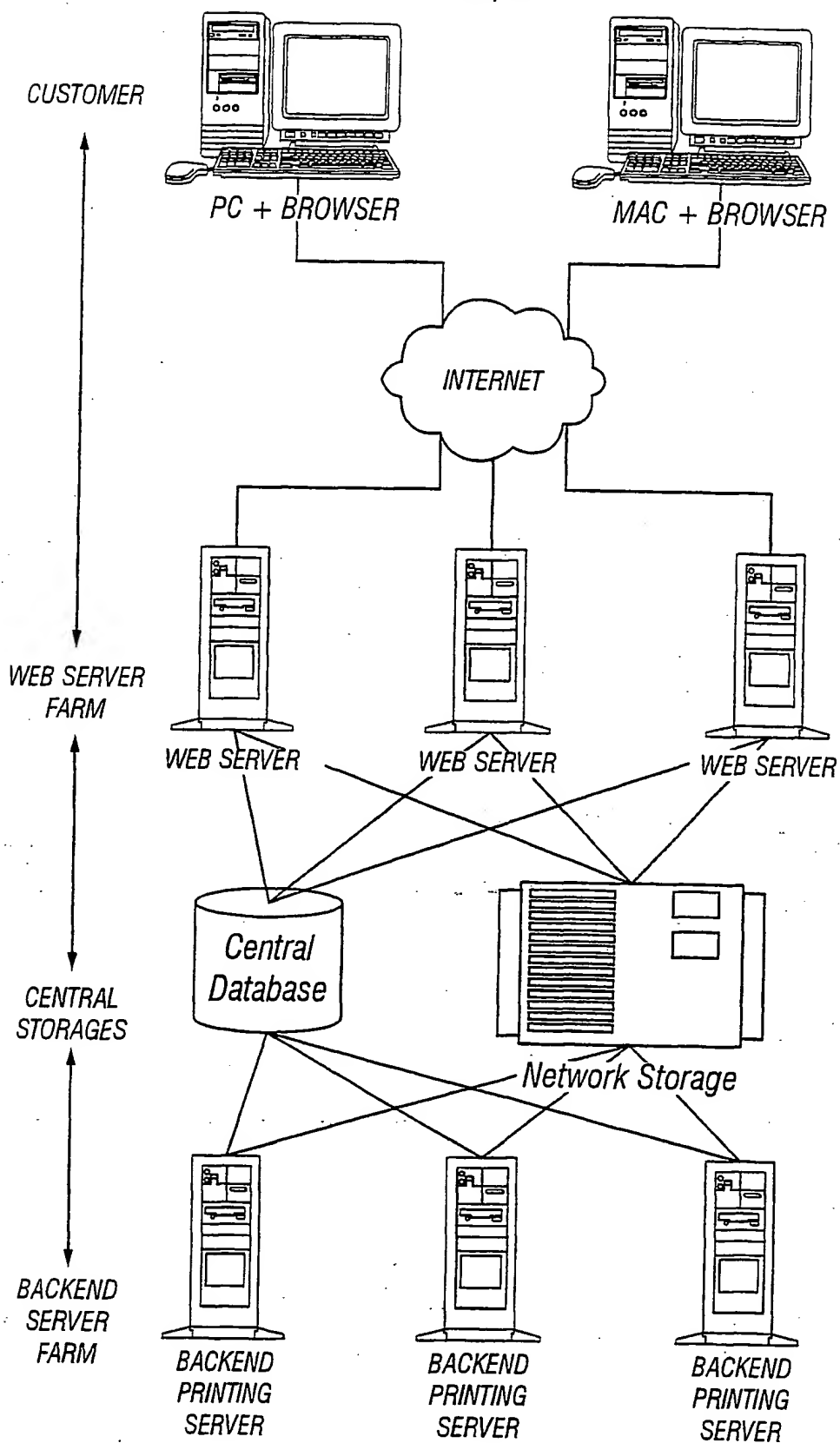


FIG. 7

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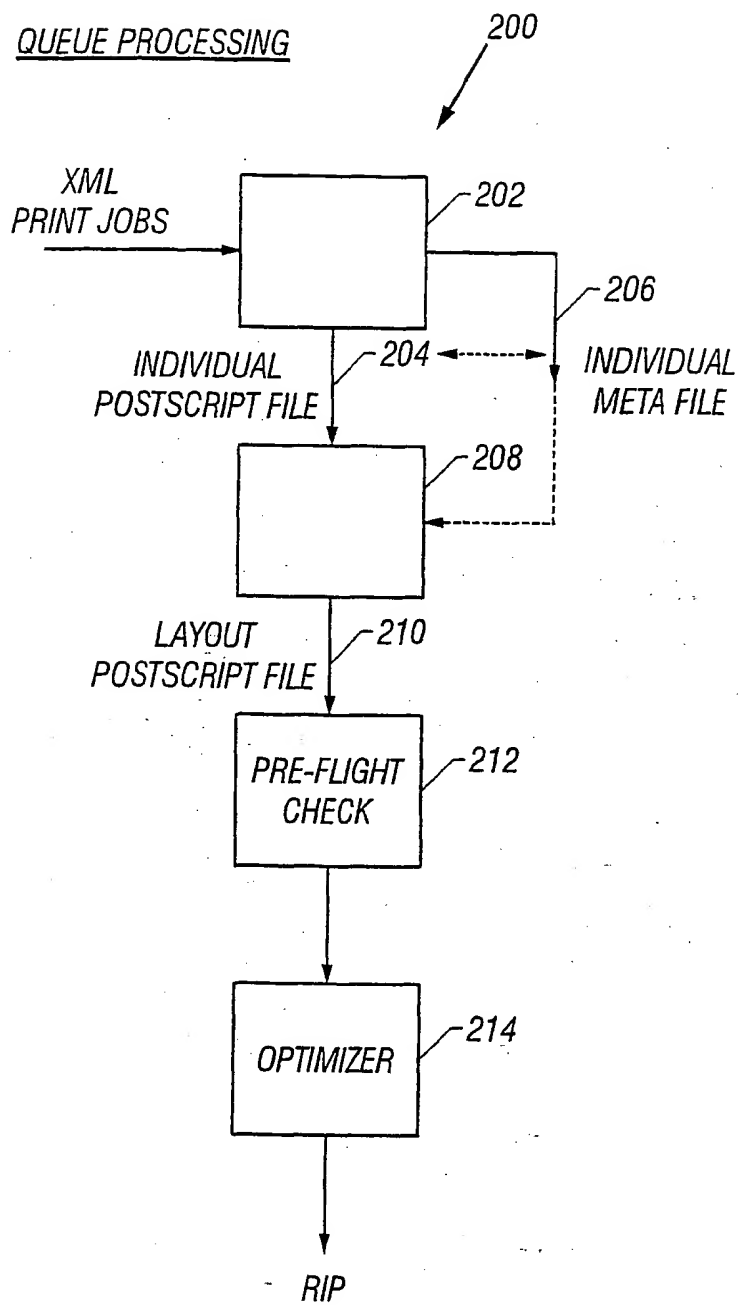


FIG. 8

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US01/02165

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 15/00

US CL : 358/1.15

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 358/1.1, 1.5, 1.6, 1.9, 1.11, 1.12, 1.15, 400, 500

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

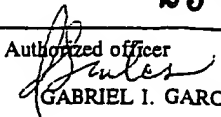
Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

| Category* | Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages | Relevant to claim No. |
|-----------|--|-----------------------|
| X | US 5,287,194 A (LOBIONDO) 15 February 1994, whole document. | 1,5,6,8 |
| Y | | 2-4,7 |
| Y | US 5,974,234 A (LEVINE et al.) 26 October 1999, whole document. | 1-8 |
| Y,P | US 6,145,031 A (MASTIE et al.) 07 November 2000, whole document. | 1-8 |
| Y | US 5,918,988 A (OIJEN) 06 July 1999, whole document. | 1-8 |

☒ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. ☐ See patent family annex.

| | |
|---|--|
| * Special categories of cited documents: | *T* later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention |
| *A* document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance | *X* document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone |
| *E* earlier document published on or after the international filing date | *Y* document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art |
| *L* document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified) | *Z* document member of the same patent family |
| *O* document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means | |
| *P* document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Date of the actual completion of the international search 20 MARCH 2001 | Date of mailing of the international search report 25 APR 2001 |
| Name and mailing address of the ISA/US Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks Box PCT Washington, D.C. 20231 Facsimile No. (703) 305-3230 | Authorized officer  GABRIEL I. GARCIA Telephone No. (703) 305-3800 |

Form PCT/ISA/210 (second sheet) (July 1998)*

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US01/02165

| C (Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT | | |
|---|--|-----------------------|
| Category* | Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages | Relevant to claim No. |
| Y | US 5,984,446 A (SILVERBROOK) 16 November 1999, whole document. | 2,3 and 7 |
| A | US 4,932,320 A (BRUNETTI et al.) 12 June 1990, see figures 1-5. | 1-8 |
| A | US 4,852,485 A (BRUNNER) 01 August 1989, see figures 2-7. | 1-8 |

Form PCT/ISA/210 (continuation of second sheet) (July 1998)★

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US01/02165

Box I Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of item 1 of first sheet)

This international report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:
2. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they relate to parts of the international application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful international search can be carried out, specifically:
3. ☐ Claims Nos.:
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box II Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of item 2 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:

Please See Extra Sheet.

1. ☐ As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers all searchable claims.
2. ☐ As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying an additional fee, this Authority did not invite payment of any additional fee.
3. ☐ As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:
4. ☒ No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this international search report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:
1-8

Remark on Protest

- ☐ The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest.
☐ No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

Form PCT/ISA/210 (continuation of first sheet(1)) (July 1998)★

BOX II. OBSERVATIONS WHERE UNITY OF INVENTION WAS LACKING
This ISA found multiple inventions as follows:

This application contains the following inventions or groups of inventions which are not so linked as to form a single inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1. In order for all inventions to be searched, the appropriate additional search fees must be paid.

- | | | |
|-------|---|--|
| I. | Claims 1-8, drawn to method of printing print jobs on units of an integral print medium and distributing print jobs to different printers. | |
| II. | Claims 9-15, drawn to a method of using a two dimensional grid for printing using the different positions of the grid to arranged print jobs to be printed. | |
| III. | Claims 16-18, drawn to a method arranging the printing of jobs ahead of the delivery time. | |
| IV. | Claims 19-21, drawn to a method of charging for the print services performed using two different service levels. | |
| V. | Claims 22-25, drawn to a method of printing on a substrate using commodity information and non commodity information. | |
| VI. | Claims 26-29, drawn to a method of printing by bidding for delivery time. | |
| VII. | Claims 30 and 42, drawn to a method of printing using a web browser to update or modify the printing of print jobs. | |
| VIII. | Claim 31, drawn to a method for producing different | print jobs using the same steps. |
| IX. | Claims 32 and 35-37, drawn to a method of printing | using a template. |
| X. | Claims 33-34, drawn to a method of printing color print separations. | jobs using standard processes or color |
| XI. | Claim 38-40, drawn to a method of processing the print | jobs to be shipped. |
| XII. | Claim 41, drawn to a method of routing print jobs using | different entry ports. |

The inventions listed as Groups I-XII do not relate to a single inventive concept under PCT Rule 13.1 because, under PCT Rule 13.2, they lack the same or corresponding special technical features for the following reasons: Inventions I-XII have separate utility such as a) distribution of print jobs to different print jobs; b) the use of two dimensional grid to control the processing of different print jobs; c) arranging the printing system to arranged the delivery time of the printer(s); d) the use of different servicing levels within a printer to allow local users or employees to receive free printing services and charging outside people to pay for printing services; e) the printing of print job using different commodity information to process a print job; f) the arranging of priority printing based on bidding for delivery time; g) the use of a web browser to modify or update the jobs being printer; h) the use of a method to speed up printing using the same steps to produce different print jobs; i) the use of a template to print repetitive data; j) the processing of colored print jobs; k) the processing of print jobs after being printed; and l) the processing of print jobs using different ports of entry.

Because these inventions are distinct for the reasons given above and the search required for the one Group is not required for another Group, restriction for examination purposes as indicated is proper.

Because these inventions are distinct for the reasons given above and have acquired a separate status in the art because of their recognized divergent subject matter, restriction for examination purposes as indicated is proper.